

**A BIG NEW COLLECTION**

# **S**CIENCE **F**ICTION **GREATS**

SUMMER • No. 15 • 50¢ • ICD

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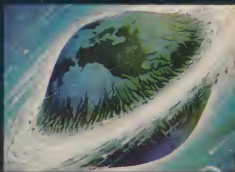
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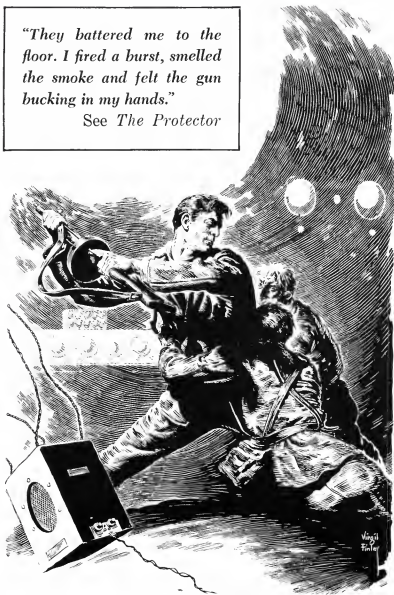
**JOHN JAKES**

**RANDALL GARRETT**



*"They battered me to the floor. I fired a burst, smelled the smoke and felt the gun bucking in my hands."*

*See The Protector*



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# SCIENCE FICTION

# GREATS

No. 15 • SUMMER 1969

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SCIENCE FICTION GREATS is published quarterly by Ultimate Publishing Co., Box 7 Oakland Gardens, Flushing, N.Y. 11364 at 50c a copy. Subscription rates: one year (4 issues) U.S. and possessions: \$1.65; Canada and Pan American Union Countries: \$2.00; all other countries: \$2.50. Copyright 1969 by Ultimate Publishing Co., Copyrighted 59, 61, 62, 64, 65 by Ziff-Davis Publishing Co. All rights reserved.

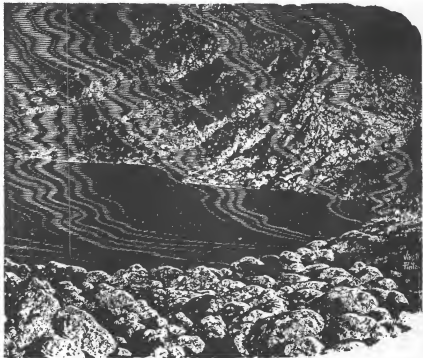


# *Before EDEN*

By ARTHUR C. CLARKE

I GUESS," said Jerry Garfield, cutting the engines, "that this is the end of the line." With a gentle sigh, the underjets faded out; deprived of its air-cushion, the scout-car *Rambling Wreck* settled down upon the twisted rocks of the Hesperian Plateau.

There was no way forward; neither on its jets nor its tractors could S.5—to give the *Wreck* its official name—scale the escarpment that lay ahead. The South Pole of Venus was only thirty miles away, but it might have been on another planet. They



Illustrated by FINLAY

***Venus wasn't the virgin planet Mankind had always assumed. It was simply that we got there too soon.***

would have to turn back, and retrace their four-hundred-mile journey through this nightmare landscape.

The weather was fantastically clear, with visibility of almost a thousand yards. There was no need of radar to show the cliffs

ahead; for once, the naked eye was good enough. The green auroral light, filtering down through clouds that had rolled unbroken for a million years, gave the scene an underwater appearance, and the way in which all distant objects blurred into

the haze added to the impression. Sometimes it was easy to believe that they were driving across a shallow sea-bed, and more than once Jerry had imagined that he had seen fish floating overhead.

"Shall I call the ship, and say we're turning back?" he asked.

"Not yet," said Dr. Hutchins. "I want to think."

Jerry shot an appealing glance at the third member of the crew, but found no moral support there. Coleman was just as bad; although the two men argued furiously half the time, they were both scientists and therefore, in the opinion of a hard-headed engineer-navigator, not wholly responsible citizens. If Cole and Hutch had bright ideas about going forward, there was nothing he could do except register a protest.

HUTCHINS was pacing back and forth in the tiny cabin, studying charts and instruments. Presently he swung the car's searchlight towards the cliffs, and began to examine them carefully with binoculars. Surely, thought Jerry, he doesn't expect me to drive up there! S.5 was a hover-track, not a mountain goat. . . .

Abruptly, Hutchins found something. He released his breath in a sudden explosive gasp, then turned to Coleman.

"Look!" he said, his voice full

of excitement. "Just to the left of that black mark! Tell me what you see."

He handed over the glasses, and it was Coleman's turn to stare.

"Well I'm damned," he said at length. "You were right. There *are* rivers on Venus. That's a dried-up waterfall."

"So you owe me one dinner at the Bel Gourmet when we get back to Cambridge. With champagne."

"No need to remind me. Anyway, it's cheap at the price. But this still leaves your other theories strictly on the crackpot level."

"Just a minute," interjected Jerry. "What's all this about rivers and waterfalls? Everyone knows they can't exist on Venus. It never gets cold enough on this steam-bath of a planet for the clouds to condense."

"Have you looked at the thermometer lately?" asked Hutchins with deceptive mildness.

"I've been slightly too busy driving."

"Then I've news for you. It's down to 230, and still falling. Don't forget—we're almost at the Pole, it's wintertime, and we're sixty thousand feet above the lowlands. All this adds up to a distinct nip in the air. If the temperature drops a few more degrees, we'll have rain. The water will be boiling, of course—but it will be water. And though George

won't admit it yet, this puts Venus in a completely different light."

"Why?" asked Jerry, though he had already guessed.

"Where there's water, there may be life. We've been in too much of a hurry to assume that Venus is sterile, merely because the average temperature's over five hundred degrees. It's a lot colder here, and that's why I've been so anxious to get to the Pole. There are lakes up here in the highlands, and I want to look at them."

"But *boiling* water!" protested Coleman. "Nothing could live in that!"

"There are algae that manage it on Earth. And if we've learned one thing since we started exploring the planets, it's this—wherever Life has the slightest chance of surviving, you'll find it. This is the only chance it's ever had on Venus."

"I wish we could test your theory. But you can see for yourself—we can't go up that cliff."

"Perhaps not in the car. But it won't be too difficult to climb those rocks, even wearing thermosuits. All we need do is walk a few miles towards the Pole; according to the radar maps, it's fairly level once you're over the rim. We could manage in—oh, twelve hours at the most. Each of us has been out for longer than that, in much worse conditions."

That was perfectly true. Protective clothing that had been designed to keep men alive in the Venusian lowlands would have an easy job here, where it was only a hundred degrees hotter than Death Valley in midsummer.

"Well," said Coleman. "You know the regulations. You can't go by yourself, and someone has to stay here to keep contact with the ship. How do we settle it this time—chess or cards?"

"Chess takes too long," said Hutchins, "especially when you two play it." He reached into the chart table and produced a well-worn pack. "Cut them, Jerry."

"Ten of spades. Hope you can beat it, George."

"So do I. Damn—only five of clubs. Well, give my regards to the Venusians."

DESPITE Hutchins' assurance, it was hard work climbing the escarpment. The slope was not too steep, but the weight of oxygen gear, refrigerated thermosuit and scientific equipment came to more than a hundred pounds per man. The lower gravity—thirteen percent weaker than Earth's—gave a little help, but not much, as they toiled up scree, rested on ledges to regain breath, and then clambered on again through the submarine twilight. The emerald glow that washed around them was brighter than that of the full

moon on Earth. A moon would have been wasted on Venus, Jerry told himself; it could never have been seen from the surface, there were no oceans for it to rule—and the incessant aurora was a far more constant source of light.

They had climbed over two thousand feet before the ground levelled out into a gentle slope, scarred here and there by channels that had clearly been cut by running water. After a little searching, they came across a gulley wide and deep enough to merit the name of river-bed, and started to walk along it.

"I've just thought of something," said Jerry after they had travelled a few hundred yards. "Suppose there's a storm up ahead of us? I don't feel like facing a tidal wave of boiling water."

"If there's a storm," replied Hutchins a little impatiently, "we'll hear it. There'll be plenty of time to reach high ground."

He was undoubtedly right, but Jerry felt no happier as they continued to climb the gently-shelving water-course. His uneasiness had been growing ever since they had passed over the brow of the cliff and had lost radio contact with the scout-car. In this day and age, to be out of touch with one's fellowmen was a unique and unsettling experience. It had never happened to

Jerry before in all his life; even aboard the *Morning Star*, when they were a hundred million miles from Earth, he could always send a message to his family and get a reply back within minutes. But now, a few yards of rock had cut him off from the rest of mankind; if anything happened to them here, no-one would ever know, unless some later expedition found their bodies. George would wait for the agreed number of hours; then he would head back to the ship—alone. I guess I'm not really the pioneering type, Jerry told himself. I like running complicated machines, and that's how I got involved in space-flight. But I never stopped to think where it would lead, and now it's too late to change my mind.

THEY had travelled perhaps three miles towards the Pole, following the meanders of the river-bed, when Hutchins stopped to make observations and collect specimens. "Still getting colder!" he said. "The temperature's down to 199. That's far and away the lowest ever recorded on Venus. I wish we could call George and let him know."

Jerry tried all the wavebands; he even attempted to raise the ship—the unpredictable ups and downs of the planet's ionosphere sometimes made such long-distance reception possible—but



there was not a whisper of a carrier-wave above the roar and crackle of the Venusian thunderstorms.

"This is even better," said Hutchins, and now there was real excitement in his voice. "The oxygen concentration's way up—fifteen parts in a million. It was only five back at the car, and down in the lowlands you can scarcely detect it."

"But fifteen in a *million*!" protested Jerry. "Nothing could breathe that!"

"You've got hold of the wrong end of the stick," Hutchins explained. "Nothing does breathe it. Something *makes* it. Where do you think Earth's oxygen comes from? It's all produced by life—by growing plants. Before there were plants on Earth, our atmosphere was just like this one—a mess of carbon dioxide and ammonia and methane. Then vegetation evolved, and slowly converted the atmosphere into something that animals could breathe."

"I see," said Jerry, "and you think that the same process has just started here?"

"It looks like it. *Something* not far from here is producing oxygen—and plant life is the simplest explanation."

"And where there are plants," mused Jerry, "I suppose you'll have animals, sooner or later."

"Yes," said Hutchins, packing

his gear and starting up the gulley, "though it takes a few hundred million years. We may be too soon—but I hope not."

"That's all very well," Jerry answered. "But suppose we meet something that doesn't like us? We've no weapons."

"And we don't need them. Have you stopped to think what we look like? Obviously any animal would run a mile at the sight of us."

There was some truth in that. The reflecting metal foil of their thermosuits covered them from head to foot like flexible, glittering armor. No insects had more elaborate antennae than those mounted on their helmets and back-packs, and the wide lenses through which they stared out at the world looked like blank yet monstrous eyes. Yes, there were few animals on Earth that would stop to argue with such apparitions; but any Venusians might have different ideas.

JERRY was still mulling this over when they came upon the lake. Even at that first glimpse, it made him think not of the life they were seeking, but of death. Like a black mirror, it lay amid a fold of the hills; its far edge was hidden in the eternal mist, and ghostly columns of vapor swirled and danced upon its surface. All it needed, Jerry told himself, was Charon's ferry

waiting to take them to the other side—or the Swan of Tuonela swimming majestically back and forth as it guarded the entrance to the Underworld. . . .

Yet for all this, it was a miracle—the first free water that men had ever found on Venus. Hutchins was already on his knees, almost in an attitude of prayer. But he was only collecting drops of the precious liquid to examine through his pocket microscope.

"Anything there?" asked Jerry anxiously.

Hutchins shook his head.

"If there is, it's too small to see with this instrument. I'll tell you more when we're back at the ship". He sealed a test-tube and placed it in his collecting-bag, as tenderly as any prospector who had just found a nugget laced with gold. It might be—it probably was—nothing more than plain water. But it might also be a universe of unknown, living creatures on the first stage of their billion-year journey to intelligence.

Hutchins had walked no more than a dozen yards along the edge of the lake when he stopped again, so suddenly that Garfield nearly collided with him.

"What's the matter?" Jerry asked. "Seen something?"

"That dark patch of rock over there. I noticed it before we stopped at the lake."

"What about it? It looks ordinary enough to me."

*"I think it's grown bigger."*

All his life, Jerry was to remember this moment. Somehow he never doubted Hutchin's statement; by this time he could believe anything, even that rocks could grow. The sense of isolation and mystery, the presence of that dark and brooding lake, the never-ceasing rumble of distant storms and the green flickering of the aurora—all these had done something to his mind, had prepared it to face the incredible. Yet he felt no fear; that would come later.

HE looked at the rock. It was about five hundred feet away, as far as he could estimate. In this dim, emerald light it was hard to judge distances or dimensions. The rock—or whatever it was—seemed to be a horizontal slab of almost black material, lying near the crest of a low ridge. There was a second, much smaller, patch of similar material near it; Jerry tried to measure and memorize the gap between them, so that he would have some yard-stick to detect any change.

Even when he saw that the gap was slowly shrinking, he still felt no alarm—only a puzzled excitement. Not until it had vanished completely, and he realized how his eyes had tricked him,

did that awful feeling of helpless terror strike into his heart.

Here were no growing or moving rocks. What they were watching was a dark tide, a crawling carpet, sweeping slowly but inexorably towards them over the top of the ridge.

The moment of sheer, unreasoning panic lasted, mercifully, no more than a few seconds. Garfield's first terror began to fade as soon as he recognized its cause. For that advancing tide had reminded him, all too vividly, of a story he had read many years ago about the army ants of the Amazon, and the way in which they destroyed everything in their path. . . .

But whatever this tide might be, it was moving too slowly to be a real danger, unless it cut off their line of retreat. Hutchins was staring at it intently through their only pair of binoculars; he was the biologist, and he was holding his ground. No point in making a fool of myself, thought Jerry, by running like a scalded cat, if it isn't necessary.

"For heaven's sake," he said at last, when the moving carpet was only a hundred yards away and Hutchins had not uttered a word or stirred a muscle. "What is it?"

Hutchins slowly unfroze, like a statue coming to life.

"Sorry," he said. "I'd forgotten all about you. It's a plant, of

course. At least, I suppose we'd better call it that."

"But it's *moving*!"

"Why should that surprise you? So do terrestrial plants. Ever seen speeded-up movies of ivy in action?"

"That still stays in one place—it doesn't crawl all over the landscape."

"Then what about the plankton plants of the sea? *They* can swim when they have to."

Jerry gave up; in any case, the approaching wonder had robbed him of words.

HE still thought of the thing as a carpet—a deep pile one, ravelled into tassles at the edges. It varied in thickness as it moved; in some parts it was a mere film; in others, it heaped up to a depth of a foot or more. As it came closer and he could see its texture, Jerry was reminded of black velvet. He wondered what it felt like to the touch, then remembered that it would burn his fingers even if it did nothing else to them. He found himself thinking, in the light-headed nervous reaction that often follows a sudden shock: "If there *are* any Venusians, we'll never be able to shake hands with them. They'd burn us, and we'd give them frost-bite."

So far, the thing had shown no signs that it was aware of their presence. It had merely flowed

forward like the mindless tide that it almost certainly was. Apart from the fact that it climbed over small obstacles, it might have been an advancing flood of water.

And then, when it was only ten feet away, the velvet tide checked itself. On the right and the left, it still flowed forward; but dead ahead it slowed to a halt.

"We're being encircled," said Jerry anxiously. "Better fall back, until we're sure it's harmless."

To his relief, Hutchins stepped back at once. After a brief hesitation, the creature resumed its slow advance and the dent in its front line straightened out.

Then Hutchins stepped forward again—and the thing slowly withdrew. Half a dozen times the biologist advanced, only to retreat again, and each time the living tide ebbed and flowed in synchronism with his movements. I never imagined, Jerry told himself, that I'd live to see a man waltzing with a plant. . . .

"Thermophobia," said Hutchins. "Purely automatic reaction. It doesn't like our heat."

"Our heat!" protested Jerry. "Why, we're living icicles by comparison."

"Of course—but our suits aren't, and that's all it knows about."

Stupid of me, thought Jerry.

When you were snug and cool inside your thermosuit, it was easy to forget that the refrigeration unit on your back was pumping a blast of heat out into the surrounding air. No wonder the Venusian plant had shied away.

"Let's see how it reacts to light," said Hutchins. He switched on his chest-lamp, and the green auroral glow was instantly banished by the flood of pure white radiance. Until Man had come to this planet, no white light had ever shone upon the surface of Venus, even by day. As in the seas of Earth, there was only a green twilight, deepening slowly to utter darkness.

THE transformation was so stunning that neither man could check a cry of astonishment. Gone in a flash was the deep, sombre black of the thick-piled velvet carpet at their feet. Instead, as far as their lights carried, lay a glazing pattern of glorious, vivid reds, laced with streaks of gold. No Persian prince could ever have commanded so opulent a tapestry from his weavers, yet this was the accidental product of biological forces. Indeed, until they had switched on their floods, these superb colors had not even existed, and they would vanish once more when the alien light of Earth ceased to conjure them into being.

"Tikov was right," murmured Hutchins. "I wish he could have known."

"Right about what?" asked Jerry, though it seemed almost a sacrilege to speak in the presence of such loveliness.

"Back in Russia, fifty years ago, he found that plants living in very cold climates tended to be blue and violet, while those from hot ones were red or orange. He predicted that the Martian vegetation would be violet, and said that if there were plants on Venus they'd be red. Well, he was right on both counts. But we can't stand here all day—we've work to do."

"You're sure it's quite safe?" asked Jerry, some of his caution reasserting itself.

"Absolutely—it can't touch our suits even if it wants to. Anyway, it's moving past us."

That was true. They could see now that the entire creature—if it was a single plant, and not a colony—covered a roughly circular area about a hundred yards across. It was sweeping over the ground, as the shadow of a cloud moves before the wind—and where it had rested, the rocks were pitted with innumerable tiny holes that might have been etched by acid.

"Yes," said Hutchins, when Jerry remarked about this. "That's how some lichens feed; they secrete acids that dissolve

rock. But no questions, please—not till we get back to the ship. I've several lifetime's work here, and a couple of hours to do it in."

This was botany on the run. . . . The sensitive edge of the huge plant-thing could move with surprising speed when it tried to evade them. It was as if they were dealing with an animated flap-jack, an acre in extent. There was no reaction—apart from the automatic avoidance of their exhaust-heat—when Hutchins snipped samples or took probes. The creature flowed steadily onwards over hills and valleys, guided by some strange vegetable instinct. Perhaps it was following some vein of mineral; the geologists could decide that, when they analyzed the rock samples that Hutchins had collected both before and after the passage of the living tapestry.

There was scarcely time to think or even to frame the countless questions that their discovery had raised. Presumably these creatures must be fairly common, for them to have found one so quickly. How did they reproduce? By shoots, spores, fission, or some other means? Where did they get their energy? What relatives, rivals or parasites did they have? This could not be the only form of life on Venus—the very idea was absurd, for if you had one species, you must have thousands. . . .

SHEER hunger and fatigue forced them to a halt at last. The creature they were studying could eat its way around Venus—though Hutchins believed that it never went very far from the lake, as from time to time it approached the water and inserted a long, tube-like tendril into it—but the animals from Earth had to rest.

It was a great relief to inflate the pressurized tent, climb in through the airlock, and strip off their thermosuits. For the first time, as they relaxed inside their tiny plastic hemisphere, the true wonder and importance of the discovery forced itself upon their minds. This world around them was no longer the same; Venus was no longer dead—it had joined Earth and Mars.

For life called to life, across the gulfs of space. Everything that grew or moved upon the face of any planet was a portent, a promise that Man was not alone in this universe of blazing suns and swirling nebulae. If as yet he had found no companions with whom he could speak, that was only to be expected, for the light-years and the ages still stretched before him, waiting to be explored. Meanwhile, he must guard and cherish the life he found, whether it be upon Earth or Mars or Venus.

So Graham Hutchins, the happiest biologist in the Solar Sys-

tem, told himself as he helped Garfield collect their refuse and seal it into a plastic disposal bag. When they deflated the tent and started on the homeward journey, there was no sign of the creature they had been examining. That was just as well; they might have been tempted to linger for more experiments, and already it was getting uncomfortably close to their deadline.

No matter; in a few months they would be back with a team of assistants, far more adequately equipped and with the eyes of the world upon them. Evolution had labored for a billion years to make this meeting possible; it could wait a little longer.

*For a while nothing moved in the greenly glimmering, fog-bound landscape; it was deserted by man and crimson carpet alike. Then, flowing over the wind-carved hills, the creature reappeared. Or perhaps it was another of the same strange species; no one would ever know.*

*It flowed past the little cairn of stones where Hutchins and Garfield had buried their wastes. And then it stopped.*

*It was not puzzled, for it had no mind. But the chemical urges that drove it relentlessly over the polar plateau were crying: Here, here! Somewhere close at hand was the most precious of all the foods it needed—phosphorous,*

the element without which the spark of life could never ignite. It began to nuzzle the rocks, to ooze into the cracks and cran-nies, to scratch and scabble with probing tendrils. Nothing that it did was beyond the capacity of any plant or tree on Earth—but it moved a thousand times more quickly, requiring only minutes to reach its goal and pierce through the plastic film.

And then it feasted, on food more concentrated than any it had ever known. It absorbed the carbohydrates and the proteins and the phosphates, the nicotine from the cigarette ends, the cellulose from the paper cups and spoons. All these it broke down and assimilated into its strange body, without difficulty and without harm.

Likewise it absorbed a whole

microcosmos of living creatures—the bacteria and viruses which, upon an older planet, had evolved into a thousand deadly strains. Though only a very few could survive in this heat and this atmosphere, they were sufficient. As the carpet crawled back to the lake, it carried contagion to all its world.

Even as the Morning Star set course for her distant home, Venus was dying. The films and photographs and specimens that Hutchins was carrying in triumph were more precious even than he knew. They were the only record that would ever exist of Life's third attempt to gain a foothold in the Solar System.

Beneath the clouds of Venus, the story of Creation was ended.

THE END



# SPEED-UP!





By CHRISTOPHER ANVIL

Illustrated by ADKINS



***What's the definition of an experiment? A test whose pre-ordained result is known? A chance-taking? Or just plain homicide on a planetary scale?***

DAVE Martinson eased shut the door of the magnetics lab, and stood still, listening.

In the shadowy silence, with the engineers and technicians gone home, the lab was an unearthly place. Its concrete floor stretched dimly out to the distant walls, making Dave feel like a fly standing on the corner of a table. Overhead, thick loops of heavy black cable branched and rejoined, like the web of a spider woven between the looming bulks of silent equipment.

In the daytime, with the lab blazing with light, and with the cheerful greetings of friends, Dave hardly noticed the strangeness. It was no worse, certainly, than his own lab, where he worked as a cryogenics engineer. But it wasn't just the silence, the darkness, or the strangeness of the lab at night that bothered him.

What really bothered Dave was that, despite the air of emptiness and silence, he knew he was *not* alone.

Somewhere in the dimness, there was someone else.

And, remembering his conver-

sation several days ago with Sam Bardeen, Dave knew the reason—Sabotage. What Bardeen had said had made that clear.

Bardeen, president of the research corporation, was a mysterious figure. Unknown ten years ago, he and his advisor, Richard Barrow, had risen till they headed one of the biggest and most successful, private research outfits in the country. Bardeen made it a point to meet everyone who worked for him, and several days ago, he'd sent for Dave. He shook hands with a firm grip, then motioned Dave to a chair. They talked about the research center, and Bardeen asked, "How much do you know about Project 'S'?"

Project "S" involved the most secret work in the research center, and Dave wasn't supposed to know a thing about it.

He said, "I know it's secret. I know a great amount of material has been brought in there, but I have no idea what it was. Naturally, I've wondered about Project 'S'. I suppose we all have. I've heard it said, on good authority, that it's a new process

for the purification of sea-water. All I'm really sure of is that it's *not* for the purification of sea-water."

"Why do you say that?"

"To begin with, the security precautions are too tight. We already have a lighted, well-guarded fence completely around the whole research center, which itself is far out of town, isolated, and set well back from the road. But in addition, there's the so-called 'inner security compound,' with its own gate, guardhouse, and lighted fence, around the Project 'S' building, the cryogenics and magnetics labs. The people in those labs can't go into the Project 'S' building, but Project 'S' people can go into the labs. Everyone who works on Project 'S' lives here with his family, goes to the doctor kept here especially for him, goes to the dentist here, and goes to the movies here. He does his work in the *inner* compound, yet it's necessary to go through four gates and past three guardposts merely to get into the *outer* compound."

Bardeen laughed, but said nothing.

DAVE said, "With due respect to the people who say they're purifying sea-water in there, I just don't believe it."

"Well," said Bardeen, "you have to remember, there's a se-

vere water shortage developing in this country. Whoever can develop a fast, cheap process for purifying sea water can expect to make a sizeable profit. Naturally, we'd want to keep our process secret."

"If there were need for *that* much secrecy, the words 'sea-water' would never be mentioned around here. As it is, it's the quasi-official explanation. But I've hardly begun to mention what's wrong with it. For instance, there's the fact that the cryogenics and magnetics labs obviously tie in with Project 'S,' since they too are in the inner security compound. And in the cryogenics lab, we've been doing a great deal of work close to absolute zero. Now, on the everyday Fahrenheit temperature scale, that's around four hundred and ninety degrees below the freezing point of water. At these temperatures, sea-water would long since have been frozen into one solid chunk."

"New processes—" said Bardeen.

Dave nodded. "Granted. But there are other things wrong with the sea-water idea. For instance, the superconductivity work that's been done? Where does that fit in? And the magnetics lab's work to produce powerful magnetic fields of large cross-sections? And the fact that the cryogenics lab is turning out

volumes of low-temperature liquids and slushes, which are piped next door to the magnetics lab and run through huge units called 'Blocks,' which obviously are a part of Project 'S'?"

"How do you know?"

"The magnetics lab uses cryogenics products and equipment, and naturally they need our help from time to time. It's impossible to work on that equipment without noticing things. For instance, that the Blocks in the magnetics lab are shaped as parts of some larger structure. But there's no provision to join them or even get them out of the lab, so it follows that they're full-scale models, with the unified, finished device—which would be very large—somewhere else. The Project 'S' building is huge, and it's right next door. The connection is obvious."

Bardeen looked at Dave wonderingly. "I had no idea our cover was as thin as that."

"It might not be to an outsider."

Bardeen thoughtfully massaged his chin.

"What is Project 'S'?"

"In my opinion, it's a thermonuclear reactor."

Bardeen glanced out the window. His hands lay calmly on the desk, but for an instant he was biting his lip. Then he shrugged, and he turned to face Dave frankly.

"You're close enough. I can't tell you just *how* close, but it's enough to explain the security precautions we're taking. I'm concerned about the security aspect myself, and my partner, Mr. Barrow, thinks there may be trouble with saboteurs or industrial spies." Bardeen looked at Dave as if making some point, then he smiled and said, "Now, I wonder if you'd tell me about your work. I understand you've developed a highly effective new cryostat. How did you lick the problem of conduction losses?"

And the rest of the conversation had been technical. But the idea had been firmly planted in Dave's mind that what was going on in the Project 'S' building was something that might readily attract industrial spies, eager to seek out the secrets of a competitor—and it might even attract saboteurs.

It was this thought that had made Dave glance more sharply at the dimly-seen movement near the magnetics lab tonight, when ordinarily he was not at all security-minded. That he should see anything was sheer chance. The three buildings in the inner security compound happened to lie in a stright line from north to south. The cryogenics lab, where Dave worked, was farthest north, connected by an enclosed walkway with the magnetics lab in the middle, which was connected

by another enclosed walk to the overshadowing bulk of the Project 'S' building. The labs had their own individual parking lots, separated only by a swath of green grass, and it had been from the northernmost parking lot that Dave, just driving out after working late in the cryogenics lab, had seen the intruder.

THE sun by then had gone down, and the deep shadow of the magnetics lab was thrown across its empty parking lot. It was the time of evening when it wasn't daylight, and it wasn't yet dark. It was impossible to see clearly, but it was still light enough so that headlights were not much help, either. When Dave saw the blur of motion, he thought at first it was a trick of the eye. But remembering Bardeen's comment, he slowed his car to a stop, and rolled down the window to watch.

From the front of the magnetics lab, about where the door should be, came a large dull flash of light, seen for a moment, then gone.

Dave glanced around. At the end of the drive, several hundred feet in front of him, was a small guardhouse by the gate in the fence of the inner security compound. Tall lightpoles lit the cars that stopped near the gate, and lit the fence that stretched due north along the edge of the com-

pound. The guardhouse itself was dazzlingly bathed in light. One quick glance was enough to show Dave what must have happened.

The door of the magnetics lab was highly polished. The lab, Dave's car, and the guardhouse were on about the same level, with the lab set off to one side. If the door were opened at a slight angle, its polished surface would reflect the brilliant light from the guardhouse. If the door were swinging shut, it would reflect it only briefly.

The question was—Had the door opened when someone came out?—Or had someone gone in?

Dave frowned briefly, puzzled that the built-in photoelectric switch hadn't yet turned on the lights in front of the lab. Then he snapped on his headlights, and swung the car so that their lights rapidly swept the front of the lab from one end to the other. There, at least, it was dark enough so that the headlights helped, and he could see that there was nothing there but the wide cement walk in front of the lab, the flat outjutting roof, and the empty asphalt of the vacant parking lot.

No-one had come out.—Therefore someone had gone *in*.

Dave cast a quick glance at the guardhouse down the drive, set the parking brake, got out and locked the car door.

The prudent thing, he knew, was to go down to the guardhouse and tell what he had seen. But the guards, from their position, would have seen nothing. To explain his reasoning would take five minutes at least, and one of the guards might think Dave hadn't seen what he *had* seen. There usually were only two men on duty in the guardhouse, and they might well have to call up and get permission before either of them could leave. The possibilities of delay stretched out, and Dave decided not to do what he was supposed to do, but instead to do something that ought to bring action in a hurry. Leaving the car with its lights shining on the door of the lab, he turned directly into his headlight beams, ran to the door, and gripped the knob to try it. He found to his surprise that while the door was *locked*—so that he couldn't turn the knob—it wasn't *latched*. The catch had not snapped into its slot. As he tugged at it, the door pulled open.

Dave looked quickly around, and saw someone standing in front of the guardhouse, looking his way. He yanked the door wide open, and went inside.

He was immediately rewarded by the blare of a siren.

Once, twice, three, four times it sounded, in short blasts, signaling the need for immediate

help at guardhouse number four.

Guardhouse number four was right there at the end of the drive, and the need must seem urgent to them to use the siren. That would bring the reinforcements on the run.

DAVE let the heavy door swing almost shut, cutting the siren down to a distant wail. He made sure the door didn't latch, and looked around in the dim light at the closed doors of several offices, the two washrooms, and the lab itself. There was no sound of movement anywhere, and he paused to swiftly think thing over. The car lights were directly on the front door, and the two men at the guardhouse would be watching it closely. In perhaps five minutes, the guards from the security building would be here, and any intruder in the offices would be trapped. But from the lab, the two covered walkways led to the cryogenics and Project 'S' buildings. And in the lab itself, a saboteur could make a nightmarish mess. Dave cautiously eased open the lab door, and slid inside.

—And found himself listening, in the shadowy silence, with the concrete floor stretching dimly out to the distant walls, and the thick loops of cable like a web joining the looming bulks of equipment.

Then he heard the faint scrape

from across the lab to his left.

In the gloom, hoping his eyes would accommodate to the dimness, Dave moved forward. His blood pounded in his ears, and he could hear the sound of his own breathing. The guards by now should be pouring out of the security building into their Jeeps. They would be here in three or four minutes. Their first move on arrival would naturally be to snap on the lights of the lab. It wasn't smart, but it was their only chance to end things fast. The trouble was, whoever was in here would be well-armed. In the exchange of gunfire, a bullet might plow through a surface designed to resist changes of temperature, not impact. One of the pipes might be cut, sending out a spray that would crystallize air in an instant. Worse yet, the liquified gas in a big damaged cryostat might vaporize, building up enough pressure to burst the cryostat and release a blast of liquid and vapor that would freeze a man solid on contact.

Dave abruptly found himself up against a large, gently-corrugated, curving surface. He reached out cautiously across it, and realized it was one of the branching coolant lines leading to the magnetic Block that loomed up over his right shoulder. The gently corrugated surface was a thin sheet of aluminum over the underlying insula-

tion. If he tried to climb over it, it might buckle, with a noise that could bring a fusillade of bullets in his direction. He reached down, and found the space beneath it too narrow to crawl under. He worked to his left, and found another magnetic Block in his way—he looked around. The lab, instead of appearing lighter as his eyes grew accustomed to the darkness, appeared darker yet as the feeble daylight coming in the few high windows faded out.

Somewhere, there was the sound of a key sliding in a lock, the faint rattle of a door, then silence.

Dave made his way around the block to his left. He could picture the intruder going down the enclosed passage to the Project 'S' building. But if Dave could reach the door before it shut—

Not four feet in front of him, there was an explosive sigh of disgust, then a soft metallic sliding sound.

The door hadn't opened after all.

But Dave was close now, and moving too fast to stop.

His left foot hit a heavy solid bulk on the floor, throwing him forward off-balance.

From a darker shadow beside him, there was a quick insucking of breath. Then the back of Dave's skull seemed to explode. He was on one knee, helpless,

when a heavy thud and an agonized curse told him the intruder had tried to finish him, and had hit too high.

Across the room, there was a low voice.

Abruptly, there was blinding blaze of light.

"Don't move!"

Exactly what Dave had wanted to avoid had now happened.

And he was nicely placed to collect the bullets.

For an instant, Dave felt the edge of a shoe press against his hand as his opponent pivoted. There was the slide-snap of an automatic made ready to fire. Dave grabbed the ankle above the foot, jerked it up, wrenched the foot.

There was a deafening roar. Bits of cement spattered across his face. The room echoed to a volley of shots. He tipped forward off-balance. There was a crash, another roar, the memory of a high whining noise, and hot wind across his forehead. His left hand slid in a slippery hotness, and then there was the sound of running feet.

IN half an hour, it was all over. Dave had shown passes and permits, identified himself to the guards' satisfaction as Dave Martinson, cryogenics engineer, and then they'd called up the administration building, where Sam Bardeen had left for home,

but Richard Barrow was still on hand. Barrow examined the collection of burglar's tools, the small flat camera, and the little small black tubes imbedded in them. Barrow looked at Dave quizzically, then glanced questioningly at the doctor, who was bent over the motionless form lying in a pool of blood. The doctor shook his head.

Dave and Barrow exchanged a few more words, then Dave went to wash up. As Dave left the room, Barrow called, "Watch your driving. There are a lot of fools on the road."

Now that Dave was at the wheel, Barrow's comment bothered him. It was the kind of thing anyone might say, but Barrow wasn't anyone. Barrow, like Bardeen, was unpredictable, and not given to platitudes.

Irritated, Dave thrust the thought out of his mind. He fingered the bump at the back of his skull. It was large, and it was tender, but at least he was all right. He still had a date tonight.

That thought put Barrow's warning out of his head.

He slowed to show his pass at the outer gate, and a few minutes later he was on the road to town, thinking of Anita Reynolds, who was a lovely girl with a sweet personality, a beautiful figure, and only one flaw.

He was thinking of her when,



for no reason that he knew, he felt a sense of unease that caused him to lightly press the brake pedal.

Forty feet ahead, a truck loaded with crates of chickens roared out of a side road without stopping, swung halfway across the road to straddle the white line, and then slowed down.

Dave slammed on the brakes. His car slowed so fast the steering wheel dug into his ribs. The rear end of the truck enlarged, the swaying crates rose high above him, and his radiator tried to ram itself in under the rear of the truck.

Dave pressed with all his strength on the brake pedal.

There was a grind of gears up ahead, and Dave found himself stopped dead, the truck swaying down the road in front of him with both left wheels over the white line.

His memory awoke in a rush. "Watch your driving," Barrow had said. "There are a lot of fools on the road."

Dave swore involuntarily, and stepped on the gas.

Ahead of him, the truck accelerated to exactly thirty miles an hour, and weaved back and forth across the road, staying far to the right on sharp curves, the tops of hills, or when oncoming cars were near, and moving back across the middle when there was a clear straight stretch ahead.

No matter what Dave tried, he couldn't pass. Then from behind came a scream of brakes as some fool, doing ninety down the narrow road, abruptly closed up on Dave, who was held to thirty by the truck ahead. The lights of the car behind rapidly grew dazzling, Dave pulled as close to the truck and as far to the right as he dared. The car swung past on Dave's left, and the driver was promptly rewarded with a rear view of the truck. By some miracle, truck and car remained unhurt, and Dave found himself third in line.

In Dave's memory, Barrow's voice repeated, "Watch your driving. There are a lot of fools on the road."

It was a slow trip back to town. But, with the back of his neck still tingling, Dave made it at last.

ANITA Reynolds had a clear, bell-like laugh. Her shining brown eyes lit up as Dave told the story. The laugh made the other diners turn, and the sight of Anita's smile, her face glowing as if lit from within, made them smile with her.

"What did you do?" she asked.

"What could I do?" said Dave. "I slowed down till I had a hundred feet between me and them, then I spent the rest of the trip glancing back and forth from them to the rear-view mirror.

The truck slowed down to show who was boss, and we averaged twenty-five miles an hour all the way in."

The waiter discreetly laid the check face-down on the table, and Dave stood up to help Anita with her coat. He left a generous tip for the waiter, paid the cashier, and they started out. Anita glanced at Dave and smiled. "Dinner was very good. Thank you."

Dave grinned. "They have good food here. The place seems generally stuffy and behind the times, but the food is unbeatable."

Anita laughed. "What do you want, dancing girls?"

"Of course."

She was smiling at him, and Dave, smiling back, was aware of her warmth, her quick response to him, and her beauty. If only it could always be like this. He pushed open one of the double glass doors to the corridor that led out to the street, and held the door for her.

She smiled her thanks, turning slightly toward him as she walked by. She had a beautiful figure, and for one instant Dave was dizzyingly conscious of it. In that moment, he knew that everything about this girl was right.

Her voice seemed to reach him only faintly, and it took a moment to understand her words.

"Good heavens," she was saying, her voice crisp, "look at those headlines!"

The sense of bliss was gone. Dave looked around wearily, wondering what it was this time.

Nearby in the hall was a stand displaying candy, cigars, magazines and newspapers. Anita was looking at a newspaper, whose oversize headlines screamed:

PILLS KILL AGAIN!

Dave looked at her wearily. Her shining auburn hair showed glints of flame in the light, and her face and figure were beautiful. But her brows were drawn, her lips compressed, and her eyes shot sparks.

"Look at this," she said, showing Dave the paper.

Dave looked at it dully, remembering that when he'd first met Anita, he'd told his best friend of his good fortune.

"I've found a wonderful girl," he'd said.

"Good for you."

"The only trouble is, she's a follower of this—Harkman Bates, I think his name is."

"Oh, God!"

"She belongs to the—what do you call it—the—"

"Security League," said his friend promptly. "Okay. You're not engaged to her?"

"No," said Dave, startled.

"You're not married to her?"

"Of course not."

"Drop her."

"Listen—", Dave protested.

"*You* listen to *me*! Every time you think of her, hold your breath till you're dizzy, and don't breathe till you think of something else. Go join the YMCA, and work out on the dumbbells and parallel bars till you're so worn out girls are meaningless. Sink yourself in abstruse mathematics till you warp yourself around into a frame of reference where sex isn't even conceivable. Go—"

"Listen," said Dave furiously, "I didn't say I was a victim of passion! All I said—"

"Was that you're falling in love with this girl, and she belongs to the Security League?"

"I just said she was a wonderful girl. Pretty. Intelligent. Good sense of humor. Nice figure. She's got everything. Only—"

"Yeah," said his friend cynically. "Well, that's all it takes. The uncontrollable passion will come later. Whether it will be love or murder I don't know."

"What do you mean?"

**Y**OU'RE up against something you can't lick, that's all. You can't win. You're an engineer. The motto of the Security League might as well be, 'End Science Before Science Ends Us.' And it's backed up by facts, figures, sentiment, and some kind of mystical claptrap a man can't come to grips with. Right in the focus of

all this stands Harkman Bates. He's handsome, he's rich, he's got stage presence, he's got a voice of silver, and he's got an organization that works for him from morning till night. You might as well argue with an earth-moving machine.

"If you go with this girl, there'll be endless conflict, because you're an engineer, and you'll represent Science to her. Your ego is going to take the bruising of a lifetime. You're going to cease to exist any time League business comes up. When Bates comes on TV, you're going to find yourself converted into a piece of furniture. Afterward you'll have to listen to how wonderful and how right he is. Get out now. Cut your losses. It's a hopeless cause."

Dave stared at him. "How can you be so sure?"

"I've been through it myself. A different girl, but the same situation. Take my word for it. You might just as well fall in love with a land mine."

And now, Anita was studying the newspaper, her face angry and indignant.

She glanced at him reproachfully. "Your scientist friends are responsible for this. Over three thousand people have died or are in the hospital thanks to those pills, and yet we can go into that drugstore over there—" She pointed across the hall to the en-

trance of a drugstore—"And buy a bottle right now to cure a head ache. It doesn't say on the bottle that if you take too many they'll poison your liver. But—"

Dave remembered the last time he'd tried to argue with her. That had been over a magazine article to the effect that auto exhaust was connected with lung cancer and a lung condition called emphysema.

That argument had lasted three minutes by the clock, but it was three minutes packed with emotion and insult, and Dave wound up in the street, stunned.

This memory, too, passed through Dave's mind as Anita looked at him accusingly.

Then in memory Dave saw the smile on her lips and the glow in her eyes that had been there just a few minutes ago.

And Dave realized that he was *not* going to cut his losses. Somehow, there must be a way to *win*.

He'd already tried arguing it out with her, head-on. That had not worked.

He forced himself to look at the paper as if interested.

"I have to admit, you've got a point."

She frowned at him. "I expected a lecture on the virtues of science."

"Why? You're right."

This seemed to leave her totally confused. She started to speak, looked at him for a long

moment, then turned away, blushing.

He didn't understand this. But it was better than fighting.

They walked outside.

She drew a deep breath. "What a lovely evening."

"Isn't it?" said Dave. The air was cool and clear, with a fresh breeze. The streets were almost empty. Sometimes there was a solid mass of cars, the combined exhausts of which, as they started up at a green light, was enough to give anyone momentary doubts about technology.

She put her hand in his.

"I'm sorry I snapped, Dave."

"I know how you feel."

"I'm so glad you do." She smiled at him warmly. "Have you ever thought of joining the League?"

"Ah—"

They turned the corner. The theater marquee spelled out in bright lights:

BOB HOPE

Dave said hastily, "We're late. We'll have to hurry."

Where the Security League wasn't involved, Anita's sense of humor was cheerful and robust. And if there was one entertainer she liked above all others, this was the one. Fortunately, she forgot her question.

TWO hours later, their disagreement completely forgotten, they came up the aisle of the

theater hand-in-hand, and she smiled at him with sparkling eyes. They were buffeted by the crowd, but she didn't seem to mind. When they reached the lobby, she stopped for a box of popcorn. Around them people were rushing outside, and Dave felt a vague anxiety but couldn't pin it down. On the way out, they passed the door of a soda fountain known locally for its ice-cream, and its after-movie smacks.

Dave glanced at it. Something told him he should take her in there. He looked at her.

"Would you like—"

She smiled contentedly. "The air's so fresh, and it's such a nice evening. Why don't we just take a walk?"

At the same time, he knew this wasn't going to work out, and he could think of no reason why it shouldn't.

From somewhere came the rumble of a big truck, and on a building across the street the lights of cars were swinging across as the parking lot near the theater emptied itself.

Dave looked into her clear dark eyes.

He held her hand tightly.

At the corner, the traffic light turned green.

A big diesel truck gave a loud Baarroom! It started forward, slowed with a clash of gears, accelerated hard.

A host of cars rushed forward as their drivers, anxious to get home so they'd be wide-awake at work the next day, jammed down the gas pedals.

The traffic shot past down the street.

The wind was right in the face of Dave and Anita.

Gas fumes and diesel smoke whirled around them.

"Oh, *Dave!*" cried Anita angrily.

Once again she was a member of the Security League.

SHE was somber as he drove toward her apartment.

He turned the car radio on hoping to get music. Instead he got a smooth commercial voice saying:

"... boon for allergy sufferers, and it has been scientifically tested and found perfectly harmless, so you can take it without your doctor's prescription."

"Yes," said Anita acidly. "That's what you say *now*."

"And next," said the voice, "the news."

Dave reached out to change stations, but she said, "Let's listen."

"The town of Little Falls, Kansas," said the announcer, "was wiped out this afternoon Not by fire, not by flood, but by a man-made catastrophe. Little Falls is in farming country, and planes were spraying insecticide

unaware that the spray was remaining suspended in the air, to be blown in a thick deadly smog straight through town. Scientists say that the combination of atmospheric pressure, humidity, and temperature gradient which caused this smog was so unusual that no change in spraying technique is needed. The smog was only a freak, they say. But tonight, Little Falls is a ghost town—"

Anita huddled near the door, and the announcer droned on about detection of cheating on test bans, radioactive fall-out, the kidnapping of a rocket scientist from a Middle East missile project, an investigation of an additive used in baked goods, a case of the Black Plague carried halfway around the world in an airplane—and all though this recitation Anita shrank further from Dave. To wind it up, the announcer reported an experiment to:

"... determine, this coming Saturday, the internal structure of the earth, by explosion of nuclear missiles, fired down long shafts with powerful laser 'headlights' intended to melt the layers of rock in front of them when, at high speeds, they reach the ends of the shafts. These missiles are designed to penetrate further and explode deeper than any other man-made device in history. The object is to set up

seismic waves that can be analyzed by new equipment . . ."

Dave slowed to a stop in front of Anita's apartment house.

The news went on.

"... despite the qualms of we uninformed laymen, scientists assure us there is no danger because the explosions are small, geologically speaking. —And that's the news. Good night."

Dave shut the radio off before it could do more damage.

Anita said, in a small voice, "You didn't answer my question, Dave?"

"When?"

"Before we went into the movie?"

Dave remembered the question: "Have you ever thought of joining the League?"

He sighed.

"To be truthful, Anita I *hadn't* thought about it."

"Tonight is the first time I've even been able to talk to you about the League. Harkman Bates is going to speak on television in five minutes or so. Would you like to come up?"

"Sure," said Dave wearily, "I'll come up."

BATES' smooth deep voice rolled on. His chiseled features, cleft chin, and wavy silver hair gave him a look of distinction and power. His eyes spoke an unmistakable message of sincerity.

Anita, watching him, sighed.

Dave, contrasting the sincerity with the man's basic message, swore under his breath. Although it was unmistakable that Bates had a point.

"... deformed children," Bates was saying, "brought into the world because scientists *did not know* the true nature of the 'harmless drug' gave another warning. But still they do not see the nature of the very thing they work with."

His eyes blazed.

"Science is unpredictable.

"Will scientists never learn that?

"The result of any new and basic experiment *is not knowable in advance.*

"As science reaches closer and closer to the heart of nature, the results of miscalculation and ignorance loom larger. Already, the womb of woman has been distorted by science, the lungs of man filled with corruption by the technology of science, the natural longings of humanity perverted by this new godless religion.

"Steadily the world becomes more strange to us, made strange by science. Already there are those who cannot make their way in such a world, and the number grows, day-by-day.

"The scientists tells us, we must study, and learn, and take up the things of science. We

must all become scientists and technicians, and then we shall all be happy, well-adjusted.

"And all the time he says this, he is blinded to the flaw of his own belief:

"The results of an experiment *cannot be foreseen.*

"No-one knows where Science will lead us, or how suddenly the trail may end. Foolish men are raising this new unpredictable force to the point where we can no longer control it.

"*Now is the time to control it.*

"Now is the time to say—*So far and no further!*"

From somewhere, there rose an immense cheer, a thundering applause that grew and grew, and the camera shifted to show a huge audience on its feet, waving and cheering.

For just an instant, Dave remembered the blast of gas fumes on the street, the bitter expressions of boys on street corners, ready for trouble because they could find no work—machines had the jobs. He remembered the pills that were known to be harmless, and that did their damage anyway. He remembered his amazement at the list of ingredients in a package of baked goods. What were these things, anyway? He remembered the poisoned insecticide that had wiped out a town, thought of the tons of poison that were dumped on plants yearly, washed into the

soil and—then what? Did the plants take up the insecticide and pass it on, little by little, to the man who ate the plant?

These and many other things flashed through his mind.

"My friends," said the voice of the handsome silver-haired man,

"Now is the time to stop it!

"And to stop it forever!"

The cheer rose again, but Dave was out of the spell.

The speech was over.

A band was playing, and Anita, her eyes shining, turned to Dave, including him in her own world.

"Now you've heard him! Now will you join?"

Wearily, Dave shook his head. "For just a minute, I almost agreed. But it's no use, Anita."

She came over to sit beside him.

"Why not, Dave?"

Because he doesn't know what he's talking about."

He might have slapped her face. "Every word he said was true!"

"I know. But he didn't say enough words. He overlooked a little point."

She drew away from him.

"What do you mean?"

"How do you stop science? How, Anita? And what happens if you do? Science and technology give power, and the world is split up into countries that want power. If one stops, another will

go on, and get the power to overcome the country that stops. So no one can stop. But that's only part of it. We—"

"Dave," she said coldly, "don't you suppose he's thought of all this? The League isn't made up of fools."

"Then what's his answer?"

"I don't know. I'm sure he has one."

"I'm satisfied there isn't any. We're—"

"Then you'd better go."

Dave stood up angrily. "You don't want to listen, do you?"

She held the door open.

He walked past her. "Thanks. I listened to *your* side." He turned on his heel.

Her voice was cold as ice. "Thank you for a pleasant evening."

As Dave sat in his chilly car and pressed the starter, he could hear again his friend's voice:

"You can't win . . . It's a hopeless cause . . . You might just as well fall in love with a land mine."

Wearily, Dave drove back to his apartment, and spent the night in a miserable search for sleep.

THE next day, at the lab, his friend took one look, nodded wisely, and said nothing.

Around ten o'clock, word came that Bardeen wanted to see him. Barrow was in the office when



Dave got there, and listened as Dave told about the intruder in the magnetics lab.

Bardeen nodded finally. "We expected it. It's too bad, but that's life."

Dave said, "Do we have any idea how he got in?"

"Under the outer and inner fences, over the walkway between the magnetics lab and Project 'S', then around to the front and through the door. He had the key, and someone had changed the filter on the control that snaps on the lights around the roof of the magnetics lab. He obviously had an accomplice, but we have no idea who."

"The intruder wasn't one of our own people?"

"No. The police have identified him. The only interesting point so far is that he was a member of the Security League."

Dave blinked.

Barrow said, "They're naturally interested in anything that tends to discredit science. A disaster in any advanced research center would back up their argument that science is unpredictable."

"Would Bates stoop to that?"

"In that outfit," said Bardeen, "the right hand doesn't know what the left is doing, and the head is ignorant of both. Do you know much about the League?"

"I know a girl," said Dave, "who has every quality a woman

should have. But she's also a member of the League. I can tell you, that can ruin a date."

Bardeen smiled. "She doesn't question you about your work?"

"Never. It's a part of science, and she doesn't like science."

Barrow said, "What do you think of Bates' argument?"

"He's right that the ultimate results of an experiment are unpredictable. We don't really know whether, in the long run, science will turn out to have been good or bad. But that's beside the point."

"How so?"

"We're committed. We're in the position of a man who's decided to jump a chasm, has gone back for a start, and now, running full speed, is almost at the edge. That's no time to think, 'Maybe I won't make it. I'll stop here.' He *can't* stop. He's got to go faster yet, and hope and pray he makes it. We're in the same spot. Science and technology have depleted the natural resources of the earth, disturbed the balance of nature, enlarged the population. If we tried to drop science now—even if we could get everyone on earth to agree to it—we'd face a terrific explosion of hunger, disease, and misery, followed by a drop straight into barbarisms. The only visible way out is to complete the jump."

Bardeen nodded. "That's the point. Exactly."

Barrow looked at Dave almost with awe. "That's a remarkable comparison."

Bardeen, too, for some reason was looking at Dave with visible respect. Then he thanked Dave for coming over, and expressed his appreciation for Dave's help in catching the intruder. When Dave was in the hall, Barrow came out.

"Excuse me," said Barrow, frowning. "You like this girl you mentioned?"

"Very much," said Dave.

Barrow paused, his eyes unfocussed. Dave waited. This was the way things often went, and the reason why Dave had been so surprised at Barrow's commonplace remark about fools on the road.

"Yes," said Barrow, "we must have an open house. Project 'S' is almost finished. That's the only way. We'll have the people here, in case—" He looked directly at Dave, and smiled. "Invite her. Show her around. Perhaps she'll see your viewpoint."

"I don't know if she'll come."

"Tell her if you can't convince her science is all right, you'll join the League. *That* will bring her." He looked Dave flatly in the eyes. "If you really like her, be sure she's here. The day after tomorrow. Before two in the afternoon."

Barrow went back into Bardeen's office.

Dave stood staring for a moment, then shook his head, and went back to the lab.

When he mentioned this to some friends, they all laughed. "That's Barrow, all right. That's our boy."

Official word soon came from Bardeen's office, and they were all excited.

"Who knows," said someone. "Maybe we'll find out what Project 'S' is."

THE day of the open house saw the wives, sweethearts, and families of the men thronging the grounds. Barrow's family was there, as was Bardeen's. And for once it was possible to move freely. Even the inner security compound was opened to the visitors, though the Project "S" building remained closed.

Anita had agreed to come, and visited the lab, but Dave's explanation of his work was no great success.

"You see," he was trying to tell her, "atoms and molecules at ordinary temperatures are in a state of rapid vibration. The properties that we take for granted, as natural characteristics of matter, actually are only *special* characteristics, dependent on the comparatively high temperature—which to us seems normal. But at such temperatures, the atoms and molecules are in a rapid state of vibration.

In cryogenics, we study matter at *low* temperatures."

"Are they going to have lunch outdoors?" said Anita. She was lovely, but her features were slightly pinched, as though she felt the intense cold of the cryogenics lab around her.

Dave, realizing the hopelessness of it, suppressed a grin. "How can you judge what you don't understand?"

"By its results," she said.

Dave said, "Unfortunately, I don't know yet just what the final result of all this is going to be."

"Then," she said, brightening, "we can't very well judge it, can we?" She was studying his face intently, and suddenly grinned. "You're teasing me, aren't you?"

Dave laughed. "At the beginning I was in earnest."

"I'm sorry. It just doesn't mean anything to me. I suppose a man would feel the same way if a woman described the fine points of sewing to him."

Dave nodded. "Let's go outside."

It was a beautiful day, with small fluffy clouds against a delicate blue sky, light at the horizon, and deep blue overhead. The sun was bright, and there was a brisk cool breeze that fluttered the women's dresses as they stood by the tables that were laden with potato salad, and steaming trays of hot dogs and hamburgs. Dave realized that he

was hungry. But as he and Anita started toward the crowd, abruptly Dave stopped.

The whole scene for an instant seemed unreal to him, as if it were painted on a balloon that had been blown so tight it could almost be seen through.

Anita said, "What is it?"

He shook his head. "I don't know."

He felt a compulsion again, the same feeling that had led him to press the brake pedal the other night. But this feeling was far stronger and more urgent.

Anita was watching him.

"What's wrong, Dave?"

"I don't know. But I've got to find Bardeen." At that moment, he saw Bardeen, standing with Barrow a little apart from the crowd, which was now spreading out into small groups, holding paper plates and rolls, and balancing their cups.

Anita said, "I'll get you something to eat. I'll wait over here while you talk to Mr. Bardeen."

"Yes," he said. "Thanks."

**B**ARDEEN and Barrow were standing like two statues, each of them holding a hamburger and a paper cup. Barrow had his eyes shut as Dave approached, but now he opened them.

"No chance," Barrow said. "The lasers will melt the rock in front of them and when the rock-

et passes, the additional heat, and the release of pressure, will cause sudden vaporization.

Bardeen said, "It *can't* be that hot."

"The rockets will be traveling at such a speed as to compress the laser beam longitudinally. Remember, the rockets won't be working *against* gravity. Gravity will be helping them."

Dave frowned. How could that be, unless a rocket were fired *down* into a hole? Suddenly he remembered the news broadcast. Geologists planned to study the structure of the earth by analyzing the shock waves from underground explosions.

Bardeen said, "The phenomenon will be evanescent, unstable. But it will travel right along with the rocket, which will be moving at too high a speed to be crushed from the sides by the pressure. Remember, the deep layers will liquefy, then vaporize, and the pressure of vaporization behind the rocket will plunge it deeper and faster. The top of that hole will be hell on earth. There'll be a column of vapor miles high and the uprush will blast away the sides of the hole, widening it as it goes."

"It will melt the rocket."

"Yes, but too late."

"Will it explode?"

"Yes. Very, very deep."

"So far, we have a geological expedition wiped out."

"Yes, but a nuclear explosion at that depth is going to find matter under higher pressure than in any previous experiment. When the particles from that explosion strike those close-packed atomic nuclei—"

Bardeen said tightly, "Chain reaction?"

"Yes."

"Self-sustaining?"

"I can't tell yet. A small error at the beginning would slowly cause the rocket to fall behind the wave front, and penetrate less deeply."

"If we could only warn—"

"How? We tried that once, remember?"

"I know. There's no reason for them to believe us."

Before he thought, Dave said, "What is this—precognition?"

Sam Bardeen's eyes were cool. Barrow glanced at Dave without expression, then nodded.

"So that's how you could warn me last night about fools on the road."

Bardeen cleared his throat.

Dave said, "I remembered after those fools almost finished me off twice."

Bardeen started to speak.

Barrow said, "Hold it, Sam." He frowned at Dave. "After they almost hit you twice, then you remembered?"

"That's right." Dave, thinking it over, was wondering again where these hunches came from.

What *had* made him put his foot on the brake pedal?

Bardeen started to speak.

Barrow silenced him with a raised hand. "My department, Sam." He shut his eyes for a long moment, then looked at Bardeen with a faint grin. "Now the twins work."

DAVE glanced from one of them to the other.

Bardeen was saying incredulously. "No waiting to match configurations?"

"They'll match on signal. This is our boy here. They'll match, if *he* gives the signal."

Bardeen glanced from Barrow to Dave, and abruptly the coldness was gone.

"You see," he said to Dave smiling, "why Dick and I have come up fast. With precognition it's possible to avoid wasted time following the wrong path."

"If," said Barrow, "the experiment first has been carefully formulated."

Dave still felt the overpowering sense of pressure.

"What are the 'twins' you spoke of?"

Barrow said, "That's Project 'S.'"

Bardeen said, "Project 'S,' is a twin set of transmission stations."

"What do they transmit?"

"Matter."

"Matter?"

That's right. The structure of the matter is sent in a code that modulates a carrier wave. The matter is picked up here, converted to energy, transmitted as a finely-focused transient beam, and reverted to matter."

"The way a radio station sends a voice? One of the 'twins' is a transmitter and the other a receiver?"

"Not quite. Either one can focus on an object close enough to be encoded, send out its focused signal, and at the focus the object sent is reconstituted."

"How far away?"

"Tens of thousands of miles. Further yet, outside the Earth's gravitational field."

"Why 'twins'? Are they the same?"

"Identical."

"Why?"

"We need two."

"What for?"

"Because neither one can send *itself*."

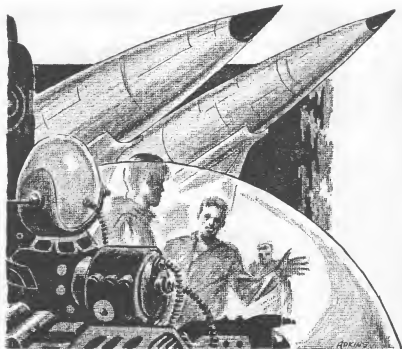
Dave looked at him blankly, then stared.

"Good Lord! The two together are a space vehicle?"

Bardeen nodded.

Barrow shut his eyes.

Dave could feel, around him, the tight-stretched balloon of the pleasant scene drawn tighter yet. The sunlight shimmered on it and it sparkled. But to Dave it seemed that any any minute it might snap and be gone.



Barrow sighed. "That does it."  
Bardeen said, "Self-sustaining?"

"Self-sustaining. The picture's clear now. They'll drop that rocket with absolute precision. It's the same thing as lighting a fuse that leads straight to the dynamite shack."

Dave said, "You *see* this?"

Barrow nodded. "I shut my eyes, and it's right there, like a garden, in a way, and in another like an attic half-full of mirrors. All kinds of things are there, some clear, and some fuzzy, some already here, and some mirrored

as in a mirage. Those are in the future."

"How did you learn—"

"I don't know. The knack runs in my family. My mother, uncles, and children have it. It's a maddening thing, because usually you aren't interested. But there it is, the instant you shut your eyes. Mostly it's too complex to follow the interlocking chains of cause and effect. But with a scientific experiment, it's different. So far as possible, extraneous factors are ruled out, and the chains of cause and effect are simplified. To that extent, it be-

comes possible to predict results accurately."

"And the accident I almost had?"

"A matter of probabilities. I could see just enough to tell you'd be in danger."

Bardeen said, "How will this —" but didn't finish the question. He looked at Dave. "It's all up to you now. Come on."

Bardeen started for the Project "S" lab. Barrow waited to speak to several of the men, then followed.

THE "twins" were two huge cylinders lying side-by-side, mirrored in each other's brilliant stainless surface. Above each, near the center, was an apparatus like a wide, polished hoop. Thrust out on both sides of each huge cylinder were two short wide braces, each one powerfully hinged at the outer end to a long slender arm. At the end of each arm was a thing like a smooth bright dish. The four arms were held almost vertically, prevented, by heavy coil springs on the cylinder, from touching each other.

Bardeen said, "That short cylinder, or hoop, in the center, can detect and record very complex electromagnetic forces. When the twins are in action, a housing rises up behind it and a sequence of fine penetrating beams of coding radiation reaches out to pass through every part of the object

being sent. This structural information will be received in the form of faint, brief complex echoes—reflections from the atoms struck by the coding beam. These echoes will be interpreted, stored, and used to help modulate the carrier wave sent out from the ends of the four transmission arms, which will be lowered, and adjusted to focus on a distant place.

The coding beam is of a type of radiation we discovered in studying the various forms of instability that occur in an experimental fusion reactor. We call it 'efflux radiation'."

Dave, concentrating hard under the increasing sense of pressure, nodded briefly, and Bardeen said, "Efflux radiation is to ordinary radiation much as contra-terrene matter is to terrene matter."

"What does it do?"

"When an efflux ray strikes ordinary matter, that matter is converted into ordinary radiation, traveling in precisely the opposite direction. The total effect is that the atoms of the object sent, and everything in it, *are converted into electromagnetic radiation, which is sent out through the focused transmitter, and reassembled far away.*"

Dave nodded slowly. "You said I was needed. Why?"

"The trouble with this process is that we have great difficulty

bringing about the form of instability that generates efflux radiation. The worst of it is that the proper form of instability must occur simultaneously, in *both twins*, if the process is to be successful."

"What do you mean?"

"Both of these cylinders are fitted out as colonization spaceships. We have a whopping government contract for this work, which is certain—was certain—to put this country far ahead of any other in space. Because after one of these two ships transmits the other, that *other ship focuses on and transmits the first*. But the proper type of instability to generate efflux radiation must occur in both ships simultaneously, because if only one has it, the other may be carried out of range before it can do its part."

"What can I do about that? I never heard of efflux radiation before. I don't know the first thing about it."

Barrow smiled. "Last night you were wrestling an intruder when a volley of shots was fired at him. He was killed. You were not touched. A moment before that volley of shots, he was shooting at you himself from a distance of possibly two feet. You weren't touched. Shortly after, you were in a deadly situation on the highway, again untouched."

"Yes, but what did I have to do—"

"Did you ever hear the expression 'wild talents'?"

"Yes. Sure, but—"

"Within limits, I can foresee the future—that's precognition. But you have a deeper control of time and motion relationships. It may be as automatic and unconscious as the blink of an eye, but it's there. And we need it."

THE crowd was coming into Project "S" building. They looked tense, white-faced, scared.

Dave could feel the pressure, all but unbearable.

"What do I do?"

Barrow led him inside one of the huge cylinders, and down a corridor that had wide strips of strong black mesh on both walls.

"For getting around," said Barrow, "when we're in space. You take hold of the mesh. We have no arrangement for artificial gravity on these ships."

He unlocked a door marked "No Admittance," and there before Dave was a softly-polished panel with a large black circular screen marked off in radians, and two centers of intense violet light, surrounded by an oscillating purple region, its boundary shifting irregularly from moment to moment. Just beside the panel was a lever marked "Danger—Manual Interlock." On the pale green wall nearby was an intercom unit.



Barrow said, "These two centers of light represent the ships' fusion reactors. As long as a band of purple exists around either center, conditions are wrong to move the ship. When the purple disappears, and there are only the two centers of violet light, we have simultaneous efflux instability. *Then* pull back that lever."

"We have just a few minutes," said Barrow. "When everyone's on board, I'll speak to you through that intercom."

The door clicked shut.

Dave looked at the pale-green door, then turned to urgently will the writhing purple boundary out of existence.

Unaffected, the two bright violet centers swam in a twisting pool of purple.

Dave's heart pounded, and he felt dizzy with effort. But nothing happened.

There was a click from the wall speaker.

"All right, Dave. Everyone's on board. We've opened the dome of the building. Go ahead."

Dave opened his mouth to demand more time, to insist on an explanation—and a calmness slid over him suddenly. The intensity of the pressure was suddenly gone. the writhing purple shrank into the violet centers of light.

Unhesitatingly, Dave pulled back the lever.

There was blurring of consciousness, suggesting a room seen in a rapidly flickering light.

Then Barrow's voice was saying, "Break interlock."

Dave shoved forward the lever.

Once more, consciousness was continuous. He had a strange feeling as if he had raced over the precisely-spaced railroad ties after a train, and had finally caught it and hauled himself aboard.

He glanced at the intercom.

"Will you need me right away?"

"Not where you are. Come up to the viewer. You turn to your left as you go out, and up the ladder to your right."

"Be right up."

Dave tried to turn around, and promptly drifted up from the floor. It was only then that he really believed it.

It had worked.

They were out in space.

EARTH hung on the screen before them like a big blue-green basketball with a tiny incandescent plume bursting from its equator.

Anita, her face pale, was clinging to Dave as they watched the screen. The crowd around them was tense and silent, their gaze riveted on the screen.

Bardeen and Barrow were nearby. Bardeen murmured, "It's started?"

"Yes." Barrow's eyes were shut.

"Self-sustaining?"

"It must be."

On the screen, the blazing plume strengthened and grew brighter.

Dave held his breath.

The single flame erupted into a blazing circle that shot around the globe.

The terrible heat flashed the nearby seas into vapor, huge cracks appeared, and the sudden violence hurled up chunks of the solid planet that were the size of mountains. Then the blinding scene was blurred by dense expanding clouds of vapor.

How long they'd watched, Dave didn't know, but he felt worn-out and sick. He held Anita, who was crying miserably and quietly.

Bardeen turned wearily from the screen. "Any chance of the fragments fusing themselves together again?"

Barrow shook his head. "Just another asteroid belt. Maybe that's what caused the first one."

Dave forced his dulled mind to assess the situation. Science had destroyed a planet. And science had enabled a few survivors to escape in ships especially equipped to colonize another planet.

Bardeen, apparently thinking along the same line, said, "At least these ships are equipped to make us self-sustaining. We have advanced equipment, and the reactors put more energy at our disposal than the whole human race had twenty years ago. We can start again."

Anita looked up. "And try *more* scientific experiments? How long before the *next* mistake?"

"Ask Dave," Bardeen said quietly, "and he'll tell you our method is different. An experiment isn't an experiment when you can foresee the result, and stop in time."

He turned to the screen where the blaze of light glowed through boiling clouds of vapor.

"That," he said, "was the last experiment."

**THE END**





*Once upon a time a man named Frank Stockton wrote a quite short tale destined to become immortal. It was The Lady or The Tiger? and which one the hero chose was left to the reader to decide. Robert Young does not avoid such issues in this futuristic version of Stockton's story. Instead, he plunges you right down onto the deadly floor of the . . .*

## **ARENA OF DECISIONS**

By **ROBERT F. YOUNG**

Illustrated by **SHELLING**

THE Lady Bri-laithe was famed for her beauty throughout the planet-satrapy of Ingcell, of which her father, Feidlich the Rampant, was satrap. She claimed that on her late mother's side she could trace her genealogy back to Homebase, and that her pedigree was responsible for her pulchritude. However, as the ancient Homebase colonists who had originally settled on Ingcell and intermarried with the natives had been exceedingly few in number, the Lady Bri-laithe's claim was generally doubted.

Among the most recent to doubt it was taxfaxman Jaskar Prell, the Homebase auditor-at-large who had come to Ingcell to audit the satrapy's taxfax-screens for the Erthempire fiscal-period that had begun July 1, 2340 A.D. and ended July 1, 2350 A.D. He doubted it even more after he met the Lady Bri-laithe in person at the banquet which the satrap held in his honor, and more yet when he danced with her afterward in Feidlich's block-long ballroom. "Beauty too rich for use, for Homebase too dear," were the words he spoke to her at the measure's end. "It is not for you, my Lady," he continued a few moments later as they stepped through the self-actuating French doorway that led to the satrap's fabled garden, "to endeavor to validate your claim

that Homebase is the origin of your genealogical line, but for Homebase gratefully to acknowledge the validity of that claim whether it be valid or not."

Ingcell's summer sky was bedecked in all its stellar finery, and a warm wind was sighing up from the south, bringing with it faint but fragrant evidence of the distant *rogain* farms where the bright-blue blooms that had made the planet famous throughout the galaxy and that had given it one of the most enviable economic ratings in the Erthempire were robotically cultivated. The garden was a fairyland of fountains and flowers, of statues and serpentine paths. Beauty such as the Lady Bri-laithe's prospered in such a setting. Lithe yet curvaceous of figure, savage yet classic of face, she was an Ingcellian goddess incarnate. Add to these attributes a pair of large and luminous eyes the hue of golden grain and a wealth of lustrous hair the shade of midnight skies, and it becomes possible to understand why Jaskar Prell, a cynic with regard to all things and to love in particular, was in the process of being consumed by a desire such as he had never dreamed could exist.

THE Lady Bri-laithe seated herself on a marble bench flanked by marble Ingcellian tigers and backgrounded by trel-

lised Ingcellian roses. She arranged the lower section of her blue brocaded gown in such a way as to present her figure at its best and simultaneously to indicate to Prell that he was invited to sit as close to her as protocol permitted. After Prell accepted the invitation, she said, "The proof of my Homebase ancestry lies not in my face, Jaskar Prell, but in my heart. Ever since I first viewed a geographi-tape of the planet and saw the mountains and the seas and the megalopolises I have known a nostalgia so acute that Ingcellian landscapes seem to me as vapid and as colorless as week-old wine."

"You would like to go there then, my Lady?"

"Nay—I would like to live there, Jaskar Prell. And I would be living there this very moment, were it not for Homebase's selfishness."

"Our immigration law does not stem from selfishness, my Lady Bri-laithe. Nor does the anti-miscegenation law that walks hand in hand with it. Both arise from the ineluctable fact that Homebase's population figures preclude the naturalization of even one satrapy subject, no matter how competent he—or how comely she—may be. But we do not turn visitors away from our azure door, my Lady, and a subject of your illustrious standing

could obtain, merely for the asking, a passport granting her Homebase residence for a whole year."

The Lady Bri-laithe's right thumb and ring-finger executed a deft and disdainful fillip. "A year indeed! And what would I do afterward, Jaskar Prell? Return to a home-planet that had bored me to distraction before I had even left it? No, Jaskar Prell, if I am to be denied the entire cake, then I want no part of the crumbs of consolation."

At this juncture, a tall young man wearing the silvered dress-whites of a high court-official entered the garden, bringing with him, through the opening and closing French doors, several bars of Ingcell's national waltz. He was Donn Deska, the PR-man to whom Feidlich had entrusted the care and the feeding and the entertaining of the auditor-at-large. He was also, Prell knew, the chief candidate for the Lady Bri-laithe's hand. If Prell hadn't known this, he would have guessed it instantly from the expression that touched the PR-man's ferocious yet somehow sensitive face at the sight of the Lady Bri-laithe sitting virtually in another man's arms.

Halting several feet from the bench, Deska said, "My most abject apologies for this intrusion, Honorable Prell. But in keeping with the wishes of his Eminence,

the satrap of Ingcell, I have prepared an itinerary for the remainder of your stay here and I would like to brief you on it at your earliest convenience."

Prell nodded. "Proceed then, Donn Deska."

FROM the breast pocket of his silvered coat the PR-man withdrew a small notebook. Opening it, he began, "In the morning, Honorable Prell, it will be my privilege to conduct you through the TaxFax Building where, it is to be hoped, you will find Ingcell's taxfax-screens in accord with your eidetic records. Following your examination of the screens, it will next be my privilege to escort you, early in the afternoon, to the Arena of Decisions, where an accused murderer will be on trial for his life and where you may observe our simple system of justice in action. It will next be my privilege to escort you via jettrain to the southern province of Teichid, there to conduct you via mech-safari into the jungle where, on the following day, professional beaters will supply you with as many antelopes as you may wish to gun down. After the hunt, we will return to the capital city, whereupon the itinerary will be both extended and diversified, should you elect to remain in the satrapy in excess of the estimated two days which you requested

of the port authority when you berthed your ship. I trust that these arrangements will be satisfactory, Honorable Prell?"

"They will," Prell said, "after they have been altered in two respects. First, I want the Lady Bri-laithe to accompany us on our visit to the Arena of Decisions and afterward on our excursion to Teichid. Provided, of course," he added, turning toward the lady in question, "this is agreeable to you, my Lady Bri-laithe."

Lush lashes lowered briefly over golden orbs of eyes. "It is most agreeable, Jaskar Prell."

"Second," Prell went on, returning his gaze to Deska, "I will conduct my audit of the taxfax-screens, not tomorrow morning, but tonight." He got to his feet, took the Lady Bri-laithe's hands, and pulled her up beside him: "Hence, my Lady Bri-laithe, with your permission I will now take my leave, in order that the official part of my visit may be consummated forthwith, thereby freeing my mind of business matters, and enabling me to contemplate matters that are closer to my heart."

She squeezed his hands ever so slightly before she freed her own, and he knew that half the battle was won. "Very well, Honorable Prell. I will return to the ballroom and tell the musicians to cease their airs, after which I

will retire for the night, in order that tomorrow can be made to come the faster."

After she disappeared beyond the French doors, Prell turned toward Deska. The PR-man's face had fallen apart, and he was in the midst of putting it back together again. "If you will be so kind as to lead the way, Donn Deska?"

"This way, Honorable Prell. We will take my jetabout."

NEXT to the satrap's palace, which covered six acres of once-fertile land, the Ingcellian Taxfax Building was the largest structure in the satrapy. Computers took up most of the space, but there was still enough left over to afford the taxfax-screen room the dimensions of a starport terminal. The screens were three feet in width, extended from floor to ceiling, and covered every square inch of wall space, save for the areas allotted for the two doorways—the royal one, which Prell and Deska used, and the all-purpose one, which the cybermen used.

There was a cyberman for every six screens. Most of them were bleary-eyed, having just left their beds in response to Deska's summons. All of them, wide-awake and bleary-eyed alike, were white-faced and trembling. This came as no surprise

to Prell, who knew not only the extent of his reputation, but knew as well the wish-fulfillment limerick which some unsung poet laureate had composed not long ago and which had traveled, via galactic grapevine, to every corner of the Erthempire:

*There was a taxfaxman named  
Prell,  
Who could audit exceedingly  
well.  
So fast were his fractions,  
The McCoy Interactions  
Reduced his red corpuscles to  
jell.*

Far from resenting the limerick, Prell was proud of being its source of inspiration, and as he proceeded on his tour of examination he took keen delight in the discomfiture of the Ingcellian cybermen, some of whom, no doubt, had been quoting the lines that very evening. Each time he paused before a screen, the cyberman in charge of it punched its fax and figures into clear-cut illumination, and he gave it a single up-and-down glance and went on. No one but a qualified taxfaxman could have made head or tail out of so complex an array of calculations, and no one but a qualified taxfaxman of Prell's caliber could have instantly and eidetically matched each set against the corresponding set that the Ingcellian satrapy had submit-

ted to Homebase Taxfax Headquarters. So accomplished an auditor was he, in fact, that he couldn't miss a discrepancy even if he wanted to, and he almost invariably found one. In the present instance it existed between the calculations on the *rogain*-screen and the corresponding calculations which he had committed to memory. And a handsome discrepancy it was, too—20,000,000 credits, no less. At the 90% regular tax-rate, that came to cr18,000,000, while cr18,000,000 computed at the 1000% backtax rate came to cr18,000,000,000, leaving Feidlich the Rampant holding the bag to the tune of cr18,018,000,000.

Prell did not doubt in the least that the discrepancy was an accidental one. Usually such mistakes were, as their consequences were so severe that not even the boldest of satraps would risk incurring them. But regardless of whether Feidlich had meant to cheat the Erthempire or not, he was on the spot, and by the time he got off the spot, his kingdom would be in chaos, while he himself would probably end up hanging himself by the neck until dead.

None of which would have made the slightest difference to Prell if it hadn't been for the fact that he was madly in love with the Lady Bri-laithe.

Deska was standing at his el-

bow, nervously shifting from one foot to the other. Prell let him suffer for a little while longer, than said, "I am finished, Donn Deska—we can go now."

"I trust that you have found everything in excellent accord, Honorable Prell?"

"I will submit my report personally to his Eminence upon our return from Teichid. You may so inform him at your earliest convenience."

"Very well, Honorable Prell. Meanwhile, I will transport you to your quarters."

Prell followed him out of the building. He was not particularly surprised when Deska paused beneath an ornate streetlamp and turned to him and blurted, "I feel that I should enlighten you as regards my feelings toward the Lady Bri-laithe, Honorable Prell, before the present situation is allowed to proceed any further."

Prell looked at his rival shrewdly. The PR-man's face was a study in distress, determination, and despair. "All right, Deska—go on."

Deska squared his shoulders and took a deep breath. "I think that it is clear to you," he said presently, "that I am in love with the lady in question. However, I am afraid that it is not clear to you that I am prepared to take whatever steps that prove to be necessary to insure my realizing my love and to insure my



winning hers in return. Therefore, I must warn you, Honorable Prell, that should your present attitude towards her continue I will inform the Homebase authorities via transee-radio that your behavior is not in keeping with the dictates of the Homebase anti-miscegenation law. In other words, I will make certain that you do not realize your intentions towards the Lady Bri-laithe, whether they be honorable or not; and it should be evident to you, Honorable Prell, that in postulating that they are honorable when, under the existent circumstances, they cannot possibly be, I am leaning way over backwards."

"I see," Prell said.

"I am glad you do, Honorable Prell."

Deska produced a small electronic whistle and blew a soundless note on it. A moment later, his jetabout came down from its aerial parking space and opened its doors. The two men were silent all the way to Prell's quarters. "I will pick you up shortly after midday tomorrow," Deska said, as the jetabout came to rest on the guesthouse rooftop, "and transport you to the Arena of Decisions. Is it still your wish that the Lady Bri-laithe accompany us?"

"Naturally," Prell said. "In view of the fact that I invited her, I can hardly wish otherwise."

"No, I suppose you can't." Deska sighed. Then, "Good night, Honorable Prell."

Prell climbed out of the jetabout. "Good night," he said. "Fool!" he added, under his breath.

ARCHITECTURALLY speaking, the Arena of Decisions had much in common with the Colosseum, and the modern materials that constituted its structure simulated to a large extent the quarried stone that had gone into the construction of the original. The arena proper, however, consisted of a blacktopped pit surrounded by a wall of polished zonite. This wall was featureless, save for three electronic doorways. One of these doorways was on one side of the pit, and the other two were on the opposite side, situated about one foot apart. The single doorway, although much wider and higher than the other two, was of the standard variety; while the two lower, narrower ones were special jobs with an overhead bank of five oversized deactivator cells apiece. Like all electronic doors, the doors themselves were transparent, or as nearly transparent as Zwieg-field panels can be.

When Deska, Prell, and the Lady Bri-laithe arrived on the scene shortly after 1:00 P.M. Eastern Ingcillian time, the preponderance of the adult popula-

tion of the capital city was already in attendance, it being the custom of the satrap to declare a national holiday whenever a major criminal was to be tried on his doorstep. In addition to the inhabitants of the capital-city proper, many of the inhabitants of the outlying districts were also present; while for the benefit of the millions who could not attend, a 3V transmitter hung from a huge boom above the center of the pit, taking in everything with its arrogant, multifaceted eye. A fawning usher escorted Deska, Prell, and the Lady Bri-laithe down a long ramp to the royal box and seated them on the satrap's left, next to the Prime Minister and the Prefect of Police, and while they were waiting for the proceedings to begin the Lady Bri-laithe and Deska alternately explained to Prell how Ingcell's system of justice functioned.

It was based on an ancient Homebase "fable", and made the accused his own judge, jury, and executioner. In order for the accused to qualify for such unique treatment, the crime for which he had been arrested had to be first- or second-degree murder, embezzlement of government funds, or, in time of war, treason; and there had to exist at least a vestige of doubt as to his guilt.

The essence of the system was

embodied in the two smaller doors in the inner arena-wall. Behind one of them, there would be the lady whom the accused had elected to represent his innocence, and behind the other there would be a ferocious Ingcellian tiger. The audience, of course, would be able to see through the doors, but the accused, who would enter the pit in a sealed mobile unit known as the Chief Justice, would view the doors on a small reflector-screen, and as the transparency of a Zweig-field could not survive reflector-transmission, he would not be able to see through them. In addition, the two images would be inverted, the one on his right representing the door on his left, and the one on his left representing the door on his right.

The upper rear section of the CJ was constructed of a special metal that permitted one-way visibility—in this case, into the interior of the unit—while the entire front section was constructed of ersatz metal that amounted to little more than painted cardboard. Below the reflector-screen, there was a small control-board by means of which the accused would operate the machine and on which he would punch out the door of his choice. All five deactivator cells above one of the doors had to be triggered in order for the door to dematerialize, a circumstance

that would enable him to change his mind a maximum of eight times before making his final decision and which would augment the element of suspense, always an important consideration in a public event involving paid admission. If he deactivated the door behind which the lady stood, he would automatically be considered innocent and a de luxe wedding ceremony would be performed on the spot—unless, of course, the lady happened to be his wife (a factor that did not enter into the present case, as the accused was on trial for uxoricide). If, on the other hand, he deactivated the door behind which the tiger stood, he would automatically be considered guilty. Thanks to the CJ, however, he would still stand a chance of saving his life, and if he succeeded in doing so, he would be set free.

"There," the Lady Bri-laithe breathed into Jaskar Prell's right ear, "he's coming into the pit now!"

PRELL looked in the direction she was pointing, noting the hush that had swept over the audience. The CJ had entered the pit via the larger door and was moving across the blacktop toward the two smaller doors. With its pear-shaped cockpit, its head-like scanner, its eye-like antennae, and its short, arm-like

booms, it was grotesquely human in appearance. Its stubby "legs" extended down from a protruding gyro-axle and ended in large, ball-bearing feet, on which it rolled smoothly and soundlessly. Presently it passed beyond the royal box, and Prell was able to see into the cockpit. The accused was a dark-haired man of about thirty, and he was hunched over the control-board, eyes fixed on the reflector-screen before him and fingers hovering over the banks of buttons that governed his destiny.

Prell shifted his attention to the two doors. Through the shimmering panel of the one on the right he saw a tawny-haired Ingcellian maid of about twenty. Through the shimmering panel of the one on the left he saw a huge Ingcellian tiger. As he watched, one of the deactivator cells above the lady's door leaped into sudden brightness.

The audience caught its collective breath.

It caught its collective breath again as two more cells lighted up—this time, above the tiger's door.

The accused had brought the CJ to a halt several yards from the shimmering panels and was frozen in an attitude that suggested intense concentration. But Prell knew that it was indecision, not concentration, that was responsible for the man's



immobility. Indecision—and naked terror.

Abruptly, immobility gave way to spasmodic movement, and another cell lighted up above the lady's door. A moment later, two more lighted up above the tiger's.

For the third time, the audience caught its collective breath.

Yet another cell above the lady's door lighted up. And then, as the accused—apparently unable to endure the excruciating suspense any longer—gambled all on a split-second decision, the final cell above the tiger's door lighted up.

The tiger stalked into the pit, simultaneously materializing on the CJ's reflector-screen. The roar that the beast gave vent to blended with the ecstatic screams of the crowd, and rose skyward on a mighty pillar of sound. Then the tiger charged.

The accused, working franti-

cally on the CJ's operational buttons, managed to roll the clumsy machine far enough to one side to elude the hurtling yellow body and to rip open the animal's flank with one of the CJ's vise-grip "hands". But the tiger charged again so quickly that it was able to rear up and deliver a swiping blow to the CJ's head-

like scanner before the accused could back the machine off. The "head" lolled for a moment, then parted from the neck-like fixture that held it in place, and dropped to the ground.

**I**MMEDIATELY, the reflector-screen went blank, leaving the accused, to all intents and purposes, blind, and cancelling out what little hope he still had left. His only recourse was to send the CJ moving about the pit on as erratic a course as possible, and this he wasted no time in doing. For a while he was successful in eluding his infuriated nemesis, causing the animal to charge this way and that, but he was only postponing the inevitable, and he must have known it. The end came when the CJ crashed into the zonite wall of the arena and toppled over backwards. The tiger closed in, then, and tore open the machine's vulnerable "chest" with a single, frightful blow, and the accused, trapped in the interior, hardly had time to utter a single anguished scream before it was all over.

In the satrap's seat, Feidlich the Rampant was smiling the self-satisfied smile of a ruler who had decreed justice and seen it meted out. "Ineluctable are the laws of Ingcell," he proclaimed above the raucous cheers of the multitude, his two chins wagging and his face a study in fer-

ocity gone to fat. "Nowhere in the Erthempire is justice dispensed thus efficiently and thus irrevocably." He looked past the faces of the Prefect of Police, the Prime Minister, and the Lady Bri-laithe and caught Prell's eye. "Is this not true, Honorable auditor-at-large?"

"It is indeed true, your Eminence," Prell answered. "You are to be complimented on the simplicity and the directness of your judiciary procedure."

A short while later, descending one of the outer ramps to the street with the Lady Bri-laithe leaning on his arm, he asked, "Does your father, my Lady, know beforehand which of the doors lead to the tiger and which to the lady?"

She nodded. "He does indeed, Jaskar Prell. It is he who does the deciding."

"I see," Prell said. He was thoughtful for a moment; then, after making sure that Donn Deska was far enough down the ramp to be out of earshot, "Are visitors to Ingcell who commit major crimes subject to the Ingcellian system of justice?" he asked. "I know of course, my Lady," he went on, "that diplomatic immunity is not honored here any more than it is on the other Erthempire planets; but I cannot help wondering whether a visitor who committed a major crime would be subjected to so

severe an ordeal as a trial in the Arena of Decisions."

"Specifically, you are wondering whether you yourself would be thus subjected were you to commit such a crime—is that not so, Jaskar Prell?"

"Yes, my Lady, that is so."

"You would be beyond a doubt—even though there has been no precedent."

"And would I be allowed to choose any lady I wished, to represent my innocence and afterward, should I be proven not guilty, to be my bride?"

"Yes," Honorable Prell.

"Any lady in the land?"

"Any lady in the land."

"H'm'm," said Jaskar Prell.

THE jettrain trip to Teichid was uneventful save for one incident. Shortly before the train passed through the *rogain*-farm region, a trainman entered the royal compartment, withdrew three oxygen masks from a sack hanging at his side, and gave one apiece to Deska, Prell, and the Lady Bri-laithe. "I would advise all of you," he said, "to put them on now and to keep them on till *rogain* country is far behind us. It's that season, you know, and one cannot always trust the efficiency of air-conditioning units."

After the man left, Prell turned to Deska, who was sitting between him and the Lady Bri-

laithe on the richly upholstered seat. "To what season did he refer, Donn Deska?"

"To the *rogain* season, of course," Deska answered. "The blooms are at full maturity now, and all Ingcellians must avoid over-exposure to their scent. Although your Homebase origin in all probability makes you immune, it will still be to your best interests to take the standard precaution."

"Precaution against what?" Prell asked.

"That, I cannot tell you, Honorable Prell. There are some things which one race of people can never, in all fairness to themselves, reveal to another race of people."

Prell donned his mask and said no more, although the device was equipped with a diaphragm for speaking. Deska's words had stirred the ashes of a tiny fire of forgotten knowledge in his mind, and it annoyed him no end that his eidetic prowess should be confined to taxfax to the extent that he couldn't bring the ashes back to life. That they had to do with the *rogain* blooms, he had no doubt; but precisely what their connection was he could not determine without knowing the forgotten data which they represented.

At length, he forsook the ashes and went on to a different fire. This one was a live one, and

burning more and more brightly with each passing moment. He fed it more fuel, closely watching the flames for any sign of flickering. There was none. He warmed his hands over the blaze, rejoicing. But he knew that before he could launch the plan that the fire symbolized he would need the Lady Bri-laithe's blessing.

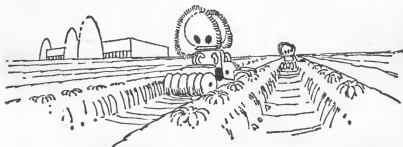
He sought her out that night after the mech-safari which Donn Deska had engaged transported the trio deep into the Teichid jungle and unfolded itself into a modernistic and luxurious camp surrounded by a force-field bomba and supplied with running water, seven varieties of superlative mech-meals, and enough champagne for an army. Donn Deska had retired early, and at first Prell thought that the Lady Bri-laithe had gone to bed also, as only the faintest of lights shone through the windows of her tent. Such did not prove to be the case, however. "Enter, Jaskar Prell," she said, opening wide her plasti-

panel door and stepping to one side. "You will have a midnight drink with me?"

"Of course," Prell said.

SHE filled two iridescent glasses, placed one of them in his hand. They drank, tacitly toasting each other in the roseate radiance of the turned-down tent-light. She was wearing a diaphanous peignoir that gave tantalizing glimpses of the black-mesh nightgown and the glowing white skin it pretended to conceal. A hammering began in Prell's temples; a tightness settled in his chest. Yes, he had to have her, and he had to have her at all costs. There wasn't a woman in the entire Erthempire who could compare to her, or at least none that he had ever known, and he had known many.

"My Lady Bri-laithe," he began, "you told me last night that it is your fondest dream to live on Homebase. To what lengths are you willing to go to make that dream come true?"



"Be more specific, Jaskar Prell."

"Will you, as a starter, consent to marry me?"

Flames flickered in her luminous eyes, then went out. "But you know as well as I do, Jaskar Prell, that the same laws that deny me the privilege of becoming a Homebase citizen also deny me the privilege of becoming your bride."

"Laws are made to be circumvented, my Lady Bri-laithe."

The flames came back into her eyes, and stayed there. "Go on, Jaskar Prell."

"I can circumvent the anti-miscegenation law quite easily, because, like all Erthempire laws, it is invalid when it comes in conflict with the administration of local justice. And once I have circumvented the anti-miscegenation law, the naturalization law will no longer apply in your case, because in the process of becoming my wife you will simultaneously have become a Homebase citizen. But before I set about accomplishing this, my Lady Bri-laithe, I must have your assurance that you will approve of the steps I will have to take." Briefly, he told her what those steps were. "Do I have that assurance, my Lady?"

She hesitated. "Look," Prell went on, pressing his advantage with the adroitness gleaned from a thousand taxfax interviews,

"you know and I know that as long as you remain on Ingcell you will never—in the eyes of the Erthempire at least—be anything more than a fifth-rate princess. But as a Homebase citizen and the wife of a taxfaxman you will enjoy the status you deserve. On Homebase, my Lady, you will be a true princess, and in addition to the public adulation which will be yours as a matter of course, you will be accorded respect of a more practical nature. Million-crediteers will curry your favor, cartel-chiefs will fawn at your feet; the First Lady and the First Gentleman of the Homebase Royal Family will fete you at the Ivory Palace, and the commodores of commerce will bring you gifts of mink and ermine and frankincense and myrrh. I ask you again, then, my Lady Bri-laithe—do I have your assurance that you will approve of the steps that I need to take?"

She moved close to him, and the fragrance of her rose round him in Paphian waves. The last words he remembered hearing for hours afterward were, "Yes, Jaskar Prell, you do."

The next morning at the hunt, the Lady Bri-laithe shot first, killing three antelopes. Donn Deska shot next, killing four. Jaskar Prell shot last. He killed five antelopes, and afterward he killed Donn Deska. He shot him through the back of the head



when none of the safari personnel was looking, and from a distance of fifty paces. The only eyewitness was the Lady Bri-laithe.

AS Jaskar Prell had known he would, Feidlich the Rampant paid a visit to the accused on the eve of the trial. "Well, Honorable Prell," said the satrap, "it appears that in the very near future I am either going to have a son-in-law to cherish or the remnants of a corpse to ship back to Homebase. You must love my daughter very much to risk the claws of the tiger in order to make her your bride."

"Yes, your Eminence," Prell said, "I do love your daughter very much. But not enough to risk the claws of the tiger in order to make her my bride."

Feidlich frowned. "Then why, pray, are you doing so? It is clear that you deliberately murdered Donn Deska in such a way as to leave a vestige of doubt as to your guilt, thereby making yourself liable to trial in the Arena of Decisions."

"I am not risking the claws of the tiger, your Eminence, for the simple reason that I do not need to risk them. You are going to reveal to me behind which door the tiger will be, and to show my gratitude for this unprecedented act of mercy on your part, I in turn am *not* going to reveal to

Homebase Taxfax Headquarters that your *rogain* taxfax-screen shows an 18,000,000 credit tax-deficit and that as a result you owe the Erthempire some 18,018,000,000 credits in back-taxes."

Feidlich's face turned green, then blue, then white. "But that cannot be, Honorable Prell! I employ the best taxfax experts in the satrapy!"

"Even the experts are not always infallible, your Eminence, but their fallibility does not qualify you for forgiveness—a fact of life which I am sure you are aware of. That which is yours is the Erthempire's, and that which is the Erthempire's is its own. I have already made out my report," Prell went on, watching the satrap's face closely, "and have deposited it in one of Ingcell's most inviolate safety-deposit vaults, along with written instructions, appended with my taxfaxman's seal, that it be sent to Homebase immediately should I be rendered incapable of delivering it myself."

Only Feidlich's eyes betrayed him. They transmuted from brown to gold, and then back to brown again. "I must compliment you, Honorable Prell—you play your cards par excellence. The tiger will be behind the door on your left, the Lady Bri-laithe, behind the door on your right."

"Thank you, your Eminence."

Prell grinned at the black walls of his cell after Feidlich departed. If Deska had been a fool, the satrap was a bigger one. And, like all fools, he must be made to pay as great a price as possible for his fooldom.

IT was not everyday that the citizens of Ingcell had the opportunity to see a taxfaxman on the spot. Indeed, it was a satisfaction that hitherto had been denied them altogether. Consequently, every adult Ingcellian who could get to the capital city on the day of Prell's trial, got there, and the Arena of Decisions was packed as it had never been packed before.

Prell knew that he would be "performing" before a capacity crowd even before he guided the repaired CJ through the Doorway of the Accused and into the pit. If he had not known, the megadécibel roar that greeted the machine's appearance would have apprised him of the fact.

The arena attendants had taught him how to manipulate the CJ, and he had been permitted to practice all that morning. Hence, he had not the slightest trouble in picking up the two doorways on the reflector-screen and in guiding the CJ across the pit. Several yards from his dual destination, he brought the machine to a stop and listened to the silence that had settled over

the spectators. He smiled grimly. He would give them the suspense they had paid their credits to experience, but not the satisfaction. Instead of rejoicing over his mangled body as they aspired to do, they would be dancing at his wedding.

He looked at the two image-doors on the reflector-screen. Feidlich had said that the Lady Bri-laithe would be behind the door on Prell's right, which, of course, owing to the picture's inversion, corresponded to the image-door on Prell's left. But since Feidlich, knowing even better than Prell did that a satrap had the right to impound the contents of every safety-deposit vault in his satrapy any time he wanted to, had lied, the Lady Bri-laithe was really behind the door on Prell's left, which meant that he had to light up the cells on the image-door on his right in order to prove himself innocent. He smiled again. By lying, Feidlich had merely made his future son-in-law's work that much easier.

But wait a minute. Maybe the satrap, in saying "the door on your right", had been referring to the image-door on Prell's right.

The taxfaxman began to sweat.

That the satrap had lied in either case, there could be no doubt. But in lying, the man

might inadvertently have told the truth—if the door which he had meant was the image-door.

The odds had it, however, that Feidlich had meant the real door. Prell took the odds, and bet his life.

HE activated a cell over the image-door on his left, listened to the audience's collective gasp. He activated another cell over the same door. Another, and another. The crowd grew suddenly silent. Did the silence stem from anticipation or disappointment? Did it mean that the tiger was beyond the door, or the Lady Bri-laithe?

There was no way for Prell to know.

Cheeks awash with cold sweat, he activated three of the cells over the image-door on his right. Another one. The silence of the crowd was so acute now that the hoarse sound of his own breathing hurt his eardrums.

His forefinger moved to the final deactivator button of the real door on his left. Hovered over it.

For the first time in his life, he searched his soul.

Had he been right in turning the old drygoods peddler on Jonakar over to the tax troopers and letting them stomp the truth out of him?

Had he been right in feathering his nest at the expense of the

plenipotentiary from Hemling and afterward turning the man in on another tax-evasion charge?

Had he been right in accepting four female centaurs from the satrap of Besancon in payment for the satrapy's tax deficit and in selling them afterward at a fabulous profit to New Hialeah Enterprises?

Had he been right in murdering Donn Deska in order that he might marry the Lady Bri-laithe and take her back to Homebase with him?

Was he, now that he was confronted with the necessity of making a life-and-death decision, belatedly developing a conscience?

Impossible! Consciences were for fools, and whatever else he might be, Jaskar Prell was not a fool.

He brought his finger down on the deactivator-button.

The image-door on his right lighted up, the Lady Bri-laithe materialized on the reflector-screen, and he knew that he had won.

FEIDLICH the Rampant looked positively ill when he congratulated Prell after the wedding ceremony. "I would like to have a word with you alone, your Eminence," Prell said.

"Very well, Honorable Prell. But please remember that you

are my son-in-law now, and that if you bring dishonor down upon my head you will bring it down upon your own also . . . I will be in my chambers one hour hence."

Feidlich was as good as his word, and an hour later Prell found him seated behind his personal desk in the palace library. The taxfaxman came straight to the point. "In exchange for my silence and in retribution for your treachery, your Eminence," he said, "I want one large payload of Ingcell's most precious commodity to take back to Homebase with me."

"But that would be *rogain*, Honorable Prell," the satrap objected, "and—"

"And *rogain* blooms cannot be transported over interstellar distances except in special refrigerator-ships—is that what you're going to tell me? Well for your information, your Eminence, I have one of the new taxfax ships at my disposal, and like all the new ships it is equipped with a commodious refrigerator-hold. You would be surprised, my dear Feidlich, at the variety of produce the Erthempire accepts as payment for backtaxes, and you would be surprised as well at the variety of produce taxfaxmen accept as payment for keeping their mouths shut."

But *rogain*, Honorable Prell. You—"

"A payload of *rogain* blooms

will net me a modest fortune on the Homebase market, so let us have no more 'buts'. You will see to it that the blooms are placed in the hold at once. The Lady Bri-laithe and I are leaving for Homebase this evening."

Feidlich's face seemed less fat than ferocious now, and flecks of gold had come into his brown eyes. "Very well, Honorable Prell," he said. "You leave me no choice."

He had the blooms flown in by jetfreight, and that evening he and the upper-echelon court-officials came to the starport to see Prell and the Lady Bri-laithe off. The couple waved good by as the gantry backed away, and afterward Prell closed and sealed the locks, and turned on the automatics. Soon, the taxfax ship was spaceborne.

In the lounge, the Lady Bri-laithe took several deep breaths, and turned puzzledly to Prell. "I must be suffering from olfactory hallucinations," she said. "I could swear that I am smelling *rogain* blooms."

"You are smelling them, my Lady. Your father lied to me about the doors, so I exacted retribution from him in the form of Ingcell's famous flowers. The refrigerator-hold is filled with them, and the ventilation system carries their fragrance throughout the ship."

THE Lady Bri-laithe's face had gone white. "You fool!" she screamed. "Deactivate the system at once!"

"I cannot, my Lady Bri-laithe. Only the automatics can do that."

"Then turn back to Ingcell before it's too late!"

Anger was building up in Prell, and it was with difficulty that he controlled himself. "Come, my Lady Bri-laithe," he said, "this is no way for a bride to behave on her honeymoon. Surely upon such an occasion you can put so minor a matter as a fancied allergy to *rogain* from your mind."

He moved closer to her and tried to take her in his arms. To his consternation, she fled from the lounge and ran down the companion-ramp toward their cabin. He ran after her, arriving

at the cabin door just in time to have it slammed in his face. Furious, he tried the knob. When it did not turn, he began pounding on the panels. Finally he moved back several paces, lunged forward, and struck the door with his right shoulder. Just as the lock broke, sending him sprawling into the cabin, the ashes of the forgotten *rogain* data came to life in his mind and words flamed briefly on his mental retina:

*ROGAIN: a unique species of wolfsbane which flourishes on Ingcell and which is cultivated to commercial advantage by the natives but avoided by them personally for esoteric reasons that date far back into their folklore.*

*With the tiger, Jaskar Prell would have stood a chance. But he had none at all with the tigeress.*

THE END



# THE PROTECTOR

By JOHN JAKES

*Nuclear war won't change everything—necessarily.*

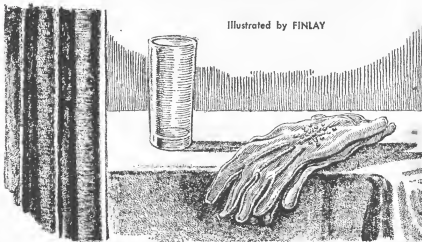
*For example, there will still be some  
point to asking that old riddle: Who'll  
take care of the caretaker while the  
caretaker's busy taking care?*

I'M worried.  
I should call the doctor but  
I'm afraid he won't answer. In a  
few minutes the sun will sink. It

will be time for the greenup. My  
lapses of memory are worst dur-  
ing the greenup.

Of course I struggle hard

Illustrated by FINLAY





Virgil  
Finlay

against them. My responsibility as the protector of Gurleyville gives me the strength. The lapses so far have been short, no more than ten or fifteen minutes each. When they're over I can build everything again by reminding myself that my name is Lemke. The name is the key that unlocks the door that hides everything that disappears during the lapses, as if I'd been asleep. But of course I haven't been asleep.

I never sleep too long. My responsibility as protector is heavy.

What about the tense?

Just a second. My name is Lemke. There.

Lemke is, and was, my name when I woke up at first light. The first sound I heard was a rooster crowing on one of the farms beyond the village limits. I rose, ate two from my dwindling hoard of Nelson's Crackers. Following this breakfast, I washed out some underwear in what was once the janitor's closet. I carried the laundry outside and hung it from the lowest crossbars of the station transmitter. That was a mistake, but how could I know that then?

The sun was almost up. A faint mist hung over the shimmering lake. All the trees on the slopes above the shore had already turned scarlet and yellow. It was the early part of August. Fall nipped the air.

I drew in deep breaths, glad I was alive to hold a position of responsibility in the town I could see nestled at the lower end of the lake, just at the foot of the hill on which the concrete-block station building and transmitter tower sat. I figured the hour to be a little past eight. What with eating and washing, I was rather slow getting started on my rounds.

**B**EFORE leaving the station, I dialed Doc Mayhew's home phone.

"Mayhew speaking." The voice was coarse, sleepy-thick and made me smile.

"This is Lemke, doc. I had the trouble again last night."

"Oh? That's bad news, Lemke. How long did it last?"

"Everything blacked out for twelve or thirteen minutes."

"I recommend aspirin, aspirin and as much rest as possible. Also plenty of liquids."

"Thanks, doc. I just wanted to check."

"Take care of yourself, boy." In the middle of the sentence his voice shifted timbre, which made me frown: "We need you, boy. Gurleyville needs you. Couldn't do without you, remember."

"I'll remember, doc. Aspirin and rest and liquids. Thanks."

"Goodbye, Lemke. I must be off to the hospital soon. Elvira is making breakfast now."



"Yes, doc, I know. So long."

I hung up, pleased as always by the tone of concern in his voice when he told me how important I was to the town. Of course I'd known it all along, but a man needs reassurance, the comfort of a friend's voice, in lean times.

Without further fuss I tramped the macadam road leading from the station to the village limits. Elms and maples rustled as I passed, a dry, pleasantly natural sound. Many of the leaves were dropping, whipped by a brisk breeze out of Canada. There was hardly a trace of the cloud in the sky. The air was cold, though, and my jacket was thin. I shivered. But when I reached the first houses on Berry Street, the chill became less bothersome.

From the Potters' kitchen, out of sight at the back of a frame bungalow, kids gabbled over breakfast. In Rab Samuels' garage I heard the noise of a Ford turning over roughly. A dog barked, hidden among the poplars screening the Johnsons' house on the corner. The motor of the school bus purred a block away. On the salt works railroad spur at the foot of Main Street a freight sounded its whistle. Inside the Paradise Cafe on Main, the jukebox was already whining and moaning.

Just as I was entering White-

law's Lake Tap, I happened to glance up. What prompted me, I'm not sure. What I saw was unmistakable, though. Main Street is low in relation to the hills rising around the lake. A stretch of the state highway atop the east shore bluffs is plainly visible from outside Whitelaw's, over the roof of the Paradise. On the skyline, black and fast, raced an automobile.

I sucked a deep breath. My plans turned cold again. From the silhouette I judged the car to be a '67 or possibly a '68 Chevy, exactly which I couldn't remember because I didn't know in which year the missile-like protruberances had appeared on the front fenders.

For a minute more I watched the automobile. Then it disappeared behind the trees. Heading for Gurleyville, down and down along the twisting state road.

It would arrive within ten minutes. At first I was alarmed. Then I congratulated myself over the fact that I really had nothing to be alarmed about. I'd locked the station behind me, hadn't I? No one could tell about the cables.

THE interior of the Lake Tap was, as usual, practically black. Whitey Whitelaw always operated on the principle that people didn't visit a bar to display themselves. They wanted

privacy with their liquor, because liquor brought out a person's most private thoughts. That suited me fine.

Being very familiar with the place, I lifted the hinged section of the back bar, took down a partially empty fifth of rye from the shelf and a shot glass from the stainless steel drying rack beneath the bar proper. I rang up eighty cents on the cash register. In the shadows at the rear of the bar a voice spoke up:

"Morning, friend."

"Morning, Whitey. How's everything today?"

"Very fine, very fine. Help yourself to another when you finish that one. On the house."

"Sorry, Whitey," I said firmly. "I've got a job of protecting to do."

"Ah, that's right, I forgot." The low, grumbling tone unfortunately didn't match the first friendly words of greeting. I tried not to be too fussy about inflections, however. "Your girl is waiting for you in number two."

I carried the brimming shot from behind the bar. "Thanks, Whitey."

I crossed the room toward the row of shadowy booths, practically pitch dark because Whitey had closed the front blinds years ago and kept them closed ever since. As always, I tried to visualize her. It was a little game

I played, teasing myself with the details of her yellow hair, her cornflower-blue eyes, her magnificent young and sweet body.

I slid into the booth and took a sip of the rye. In the thickness of the shadows I could barely make out a beer can, an empty glass and a pair of ladies' white gloves resting on the tabletop near the can.

"Would you like another beer, Sophie?" I tried to sound shy as usual.

"Not this morning, Lemk." Her voice was throaty. The words made my spine tingle.

"The name is Lemke," I replied, smiling at my own little joke.

"I know, but I say Lemk."

"If that's the best you can do!"

"Don't tease me, darling. Don't be angry with me." The voice dropped low, smoky-warm. "I love you."

I stared hard at the white gloves. "Sophie, I love you too. But it's hopeless."

"Why is it hopeless?" A hint of tears quivered in the words. "I know you always tell me it's hopeless but I can't believe you're so cold that you don't love me the way I love you. God, Lemk, I love you so much I'd do anything for you."

"I understand that, Sophie," I answered. I drank the rye quickly. "I'm sorry."

"Don't you think I'm beautiful? I'm the most beautiful girl in town."

"You're lovely, absolutely lovely."

"Then why is it hopeless, darling? Why must it be hopeless?"

THE bittersweet quality of the situation always twisted me up inside, brought loneliness and pride all at once. Rapidly I drained the remainder of the rye.

"Sophie, Gurleyville needs a protector. The job fell to me by accident. But since I've got it, I have to perform it. Regardless of personal considerations. Oh sure, I'd much rather sit here day in and day out, drinking with you, but it's impossible if I'm going to do the job properly."

I lifted my shoulders, squared them slightly, not wanting to sound overly boastful about my position but still concealing my pride with difficulty: "I have to accept loneliness, Sophie. I'm the protector. Yours, Whitey's, Doc Mayhew's, everybody's."

"You're a noble man, Lemk." The tears, so rich and throbbing, stirred me. She had a way of crying that continually revealed hidden undertones and overtones. "The noblest man in a rotten world and I love you with all my soul and wish we could be together the rest of our lives."

"Impossible, Sophie."

The spell was so complete I

thought about pouring myself another rye until I recalled that when we ran out of conversation, the silence was awkward. Besides, she'd already said everything I wanted to hear. I remembered the Chevy on the skyline suddenly.

I wasn't particularly alarmed about it, just vaguely apprehensive. Perhaps I ought to take a trip up Main and see whether the car had passed through.

I patted one of the white gloves, carried my shot glass to the bar, rinsed it and replaced it in the stainless steel rack. Just as I reached the threshold her voice cried out behind me, soft in its torment:

"Oh, Lemk, I love you so much!"

"Goodbye, Sophie." I said it without turning around.

I GLANCED up and down the street. No sign of the Chevy among all the automobiles parked at the meters along Main. Moving back in the direction of the station, I thought again that if Chief Chesterfield ever really turned on the heat, he'd make a fortune in Gurleyville, since all the parking meters showed a red-sprung Expired tag and total disregard for law and order.

Oh, well. I couldn't count on Chief Chesterfield too heavily. The protector's lot was mine and mine alone.

In front of the IGA Superfoods, hearing the rattle of shopping carts and the jinga-jinga-jinga of tallying cash registers, I stopped. My stomach hurt. I first wondered whether it was a lapse of memory. Then I realized it wasn't. I had complete recall of my conversation with Whitey and Sophie, not to mention my talk with Doc Mayhew and my morning walk down Berry to Main. It was the laundry.

I'd completely forgotten the laundry.

The state highway twisted past the hill on which the station was built. Whoever was driving that Chevy would see the laundry and reach an inescapable conclusion.

I was terribly frightened. It's one thing to talk and talk about being the protector, another to be faced with a test. I walked quickly. Two doors beyond the Paradise Cafe was Samuels' Hardware & Variety. I went inside, came out again in less than a minute with the gun crooked in my right elbow.

It looked rather small. I turned it this way and that, figuring out its firing mechanism. Crouching in the doorway of the Hardware & Variety, I tore open the cardboard carton and loaded the gun. Its hard blackness comforted me in spite of the light weight. Still, it was a weapon. I hefted it as I

marched along in the August sun

There was no sign of the Chevy yet. But of course there wouldn't be. The laundry flapping from the tower would stop them.

On the corner of Berry and Main stood the familiar public telephone booth. I needed reassurance. I slipped inside, shut the door, kept an eye out as I fed my one dime into the slot. A moment before the voice answered the dime was returned:

"Gurleyville Police Headquarters, Chief Chesterfield speaking."

"Chief, this is Lemke." I tried to remember what I ought to say but I was sweating too hard. There was an awkward pause until I thought of it: "Can you give me any help?"

"None today, Lemke, sorry. All my men are out in the cars."

"Chief, this is a genuine emergency. There's a strange Chevy—"

The heavy official voice interrupted me at the end of the first sentence: "You'll have to handle it alone, Lemke. You're the protector. We depend on you, boy. We count on you because we know you've got the stuff. Lemke, it's an honor to tell you—"

FOR God's sake stop talking and listen!" Then I swallowed, leaning against the glass of the cubicle, disturbed by how overwrought I'd become. My re-

mark to Chief Chesterfield was absurd.

"—only man in Gurleyville with the guts for the job. Now stick to it, boy, stick to it and you'll come out on top. One of my cars should be back in half an hour. Perhaps then I can offer you a little help. But not before. You don't need it, Lemke, you're strong enough to handle it yourself."

"Thanks." I stared at the receiver in disgust. That about the police car returning in half an hour was a nice touch, but I realized all at once what a hopeless sham it was. I knew I ought to thank him again, so I did. My words produced the usual gruff, confident response:

"You're welcome, Lemke. I must hang up. There's a call coming on the radio."

"Sure, I know. The county sheriff."

"The county sheriff is on the band, Lemke. Goodbye."

The connection clicked dead. I hung up and cried a while.

Finally I worked up enough guts to step outside the phone booth and listen. All around I could hear the comforting sounds of my home town. From one end of Gurleyville to the other, I reminded myself, they depended on me, counted on me to protect them. Didn't I have the gun?

I examined it up one side and down the other. I didn't seem

quite sufficient for the job. I wished suddenly that I'd been inducted into the Army before, so that I might have had a chance to learn about small arms. My bum foot kept me out. As I started up Berry I recalled that I'd been pleased about the rejection by the examiners in—where was it?—Syracuse? Yes. I was to receive a scale boost in salary at the station just at the time I would have been shipped off. Now, however, the salary increase seemed worthless. I had neither the money nor the fire-arms experience I needed.

Behind a clump of privet on the Potters' front lawn I crouched down, squinting up the road to the station. I could hear the clatter and whirr of an automatic washer through an open cellar window, but only dimly, because my attention was focused on the wink of sunlight off bumper chrome in the parking area outside the station. The Chevy had pulled up. Of its occupants there was no sign. All the laundry had been torn from the transmission tower.

THE defilement of my laundry set me off. The next thing I knew, I was running up the macadam road, my chest hurting from the exertion, breath pumping in and out of my lungs. I held my right hand around the molded stock of the gun, my left

around the trigger grip in front of the ammunition drum. I ran past the Chevvy, heedless of danger, kicked open the station door and bolted down the corridor.

Inside Studio B at the far end I saw a pair of scarecrow figures rifling my supply of Nelson's Crackers.

"Turn around and put up your hands or I'll kill you!"

For a moment I'm sure I frightened them. First one turned, then the other. They were emaciated, wearing tattered clothing. The one with white skin could hardly have been more than seventeen or eighteen. The green of his uniform blouse was in shreds. The ends of his ribs jutted beneath gray flesh. His hair was white.

He stared at me with round, terrified eyes, wiping cracker crumbs from the corners of his lips. Then he smiled hesitantly.

"Jesus! I couldn't believe it when I saw the laundry. I'm sorry if we messed it up. We got kind of excited and started pulling it down, waving it around. We haven't seen—"

"Be quiet," I told him. "You've had all the food you're going to get."

He seemed not to understand. He took a shaky step, one bony hand extended.

"Peterson, Joe Peterson. Four-hundred-and-second Tactical Missile Squadron. We were up in

Utica. I been travelling for months, all the way to Ohio and back, and besides him, you're the very first—"

"Shut up." I eyed his companion. "Climb in your car and get out of town. We don't want your kind in Gurleyville."

"But I'm starving! I'm damn near dead from starvation. So is he."

His grimy thumb indicated his companion, the thin little fellow in a soiled brown uniform and cracked boots. He had very shiny black hair slicked back over his head and his slanted eyes moved nervously. His yellow skin gave off a disgusting smell of sweat.

I HOPED they wouldn't guess how rapidly my heart was beating. The white boy scrutinized my gun aimed directly at his chest. I said to him: "I might let you take a box of Nelson's Crackers if you were alone. But consorting with one of them—! What kind of American are you, travelling with a man who invaded—?"

The boy's fists clenched. "Listen! We're both starved and we want food. Don't give me any crappy lectures, not when we got just a couple of months at the most before—"

"Move along!" I snapped, tightening my index finger on the trigger. "My responsibility is looking out for the people of

Gurleyville. I'm their protector. I won't have you coming in here befouling the air. Take one box of the crackers. I can't spare any more. Then be on your way."

"You must have a grocery downtown. Don't you?" He smiled suddenly, nudging his companion. The yellow man smiled back and chattered something in a language I couldn't understand. Both of them began walking toward me. I could tell from their faces that they were completely and hopelessly insane.

The boy spoke insistently: "Well, listen, loony. We'll take everything we damn please from the grocery. When we saw the laundry we thought, here's another one. Three can make out better than two. But I don't think so any more. Oh, man, no, I don't think so."

"Both of you are insane," I said. "Stop where you are or I'll kill you."

He pointed. "With that?"

"Of course."

He was walking again, so near I could smell his foulness. "Loaded, too, huh?"

"Naturally it's loaded. Stand back, you maniacs, or—"

ONE circled to my left, one to my right. I didn't want to kill them but in another minute they'd force my hand. I was Gurleyville's protector. I had no choice.

The boy kept on talking softly: "Pretty fine gun, all right. I'm sure scared. By the way, what make gun is that?"

"I don't want to kill you," I pleaded. "My responsibility—"

"Look." The boy pointed, smiling like a wolf. "It's stencilled in the plastic on the side panel. What's the name of that gun maker again?"

I hadn't noticed before. I looked.

"Mattel."

It was a filthy trick. While I was looking, they jumped me.

They battered me to the floor. I fired a burst, smelled the smoke and felt the gun bucking in my hands, its muzzle spitting sound. But somehow they must have dodged the bullets. They threw me on the floor, those two insane maniacs, and took out their craziness with their fists and their boots until my head ached.

Everything went dark.

When I woke up I discovered they were worse than maniacs.

They'd gone, of course, taking with them every last box of Nelson's Crackers. But that wasn't the worst. I'd angered them enough to turn them into animals. The inside of the station was a shambles.

I must have been unconscious for quite a while because they'd done a thorough job, the vile bastards—broken the recording heads and demolished the li-

brary, demolished every last one of the commercial and sound effects tapes accumulated over the years.

I knelt on the floor of the master control room amid the litter of 3M tape boxes. When I'd finished all the installations, I'd had only a few reels of tape left, and now every last bit was shredded to pieces. I wanted to cry.

Ah, God. Eleven months of work gone in a single morning. Panting and sobbing, I rushed outside and around the back of the station where the insulated cables stretched away down the hill in various directions. I sank to my knees and cried and cried. The savages had maliciously torn the cables from the entrance boxes I'd mounted in hand-hewn holes in the station wall. All the windows in the station had been smashed too. They'd trampled all over my laundry, flung it there on the sere earth. I fondled the ripped-out cables and cried.

**S**OBGING more violently, I ran down the hill toward Berry. I should have heard cows lowing from the farmyard where the rooster crowed at dawn, but I didn't. The automatic washer in the Potters' basement no longer rumbled. No dog barked from behind the poplars on the Johnson property. The rail yards were quiet. The Paradise Cafe juke

was dead, the restaurant's front windows smashed. Several cars at the curb had been looted. The empty aisles of the IGA Superfoods were silent too, all the plate glass sprinkled in shards on the sidewalk.

I ran to Whitelaw's Lake Tap and rang the cash register. The voice came out of the dark:

"Morning, frienderaawk."

I screamed at the black empty booth: "Sophie, would you like another beer?" I'd said it backwards. "Would you like another beer, Sophie?"

"Not this morning, Lemkawwarf."

I ran to the booth, threw the beer can and the glass and the white gloves on the floor and examined the little transmitter. Then I threw that on the floor too. Crying, I ran to the corner phone booth and dialled, forgetting to reach for the dime it always returned:

"Gurleyville Police Headquarters, Chief Chesterfield speaking speaking speaking speakkkkkk." The tape snapped and the connection went dead.

**I**'M very worried.

I know I should call the doctor but I don't think he'll answer. All day I've been walking around town, wondering why those two insane men did what they did, why they had to be so impossibly cruel. In ten or fif-



teen minutes the sun will set over the western shore of the lake. It will be time for the greenup.

I hate the greenup. I hate seeing the pale radiance of the buildings and hills and sky and my own fingers, as though someone were shining a green flashlight through my hand.

I thought I was lucky, caught inside the concrete block station when it began. I was left to be the protector. People need me to protect them.

It's greenup.

I can see the maples on the western ridge above the lake glowing. Even the water shines. I'm really very worried. My

lapses of memory are at their worst during the greenup every night.

But it's my responsibility to struggle. I'm the protector. What if the tape is destroyed, the cables cut, the recording heads broken? An engineer can always rebuild if there's time before the last—

I forgot for ten minutes.

But I'm the protector. My name is the key that unlocks the door that hides everything that disappears during the lapses when the little bones in my fingers shine the brightest green.

Just a second. My name is—

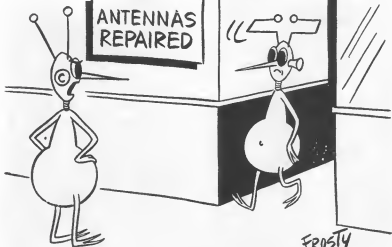
*My name is—*

THE END



# T-V SERVICE

ANTENNAS  
REPAIRED



"I warned you against going in there!"



# Speech Is Silver

By JOHN BRUNNER

They had stolen his face, his voice,  
his wife.  
Now they were going to steal himself.  
To stop the theft,  
must he kill the thief?

NONE of the company guards attempted to stop Jeremy Hankin as he walked towards the gleaming facade of the building across which was inscribed in huge letters the name of the Soundsleep Corporation. They recognized him, even without the makeup he was compelled to wear for the publicity pictures the company used, and knew that he could come here whenever he liked: a privilege granted by the doubtless very grateful company. After all, they owed him a great deal.

Since his wife left him, he had been coming here more and more often, seldom speaking to anyone—for the last several times, not talking at all—but merely wandering with a wistful expression from floor to floor, peering curiously in at the glass doors of the

offices, acknowledging the greetings of impressed junior staff, hearty executives and diffident clients with a uniform forced smile and a nod of the head.

Occasionally a bitter look came and went on his round, pale face, but it never lasted long enough for anyone to note its passage and start wondering.

The building covered an entire block, with three entrances. Over the past month he had formed the habit of leaving by a different door from that where he had entered. The company guards would not expect to see him again once he had vanished inside.

The uppermost four floors were Soundsleep's, the remainder rented. Very occasionally he had got out of the elevator at a lower level and stood looking at the names of other companies painted on

the opaque doors there; he had never summoned the courage to investigate further, though, and for him the building existed as a kind of three-dimensional chess-board perched on top of a column of vaguely luminous mist. In and out of this mist, impinging on his awareness when they shared an elevator with him or brushed past him in the lobby, were the other inhabitants of the building. He would look at them vaguely and wonder how many of them were customers of Soundsleep; and in particular, he would look at the young girl secretaries and wonder how many of them he spoke to every night—for how many of them he might be their publicly acknowledged bedfellow . . .

He took his usual elevator, the first of the four, and without apologizing for having to reach past another passenger pushed the button for the next to uppermost floor. The very top was where Soundsleep kept its most valuable commodity. On the three other floors the company used, there was little to mark the firm out from any other business corporation: small offices and large, more or less expensively furnished according to the status of the occupants, glass-partitioned or walled-in, equipped with phones of black or colored plastic and decorated with status-conjuring Klees and Matisses as well as dis-

creetly impressive graphs charting the growth of the venture from nothing, past the discontinuity of the Great Search, to the present fantastic peaks of success . . .

IT was Mary who got him involved, who stopped when he would have hurried by the street-corner booth and the urbane young man with the recorder, eyes bright with interest and the recognition of reality behind what might have been a mere publicity stunt. Then, the name on the flimsy portable booth meant little; one could see from the puzzled faces of the crowd around that the reason for the young man's repeated challenge was known to very few people as yet.

A trifle dismayed at seeing Mary's enthusiasm, yet gallantly falling in with her wishes—for he was very proud of his young and pretty wife, and their marriage was two years new—he stopped as she had done and took her hand.

"What is all this?" he murmured, scanning the gaudy sides of the booth for some explanatory poster and finding only cryptic advertising teasers.

"It's the Great Search," Mary answered. "I heard all about it on TV last night. It's the Soundsleep company."

Soundsleep . . . He turned

the name over, seeking a referent, and finally shrugged and gave her an inquiring smile.

"Oh, you must know!" Briefly, an expression of annoyance turned down the corners of her red ripe mouth, and he felt the inevitable heart-stopping stab of alarm which accompanied any falling short in his ability to live up to the image she had made of him. "They've only been able to service very rich people up till now, but they've got some new technique and they're going to make it available to everybody for practically nothing!"

He groped in memory. Associations still eluded him. He ventured at last, his eyes still on the urbane young man as he challenged passer-by after passer-by with his portable recorder, "Something to do with sleeping better. . . ?"

"Oh, Jerry!" Mary's eyes were fixed on the same target, and did not turn aside as she addressed him. "It's this thing where it tells you in your sleep all what to do and how to straighten out things that go wrong during the day!"

*Click.* Some ill-tempered objections raised, in print in a technical journal he had casually leafed through, by the vice-president of a company making psychotherapeutic chemicals: something about automated analysis—"Got it," he said aloud. "But

what's this about a Great Search?"

"They're looking for people with the right voices," Mary told him irritably. "A man and a woman who'll do all the recording. So then you just connect this gadget to your phone when you lie down for the night, and then it tells you to go to sleep so you don't lie awake worrying about things which went wrong earlier, and then it tells you—"

He didn't mean to interrupt; he never cared or dared to be rude to this marvellous girl who had married him for some reason he never could fathom. But he said then, "Yes, yes! I did hear about it. Shall we move on?"

It was probably the slight nervousness always induced by being in the center of a crowd which set him on edge, he realized—that, and the curious hungry intentness with which all eyes devoured the current subject of the urbane young man's attentions. He hated to be conspicuous, placed in the spotlight, and he knew that Mary wished he was vainer and stood out more from the mass, so she might quite well insist on him making a recording here.

Whatever they were being made to say, the men addressing the microphone weren't spending more than a minute each on it, and the urbane young man was already eying him with an

alert, thoughtful expression.

"No, you're going to enter," Mary said with determination. "You've got a nice voice. I've always told you that. In fact I think maybe it was more for your voice than anything else that I married you. Especially in the dark. When you talk to me after putting the light out, it makes me—"

"Mary, will you please stop that!" he whispered, feeling a hot red current in his cheeks and glancing around with a frantic prayer that no one should have overheard.

She giggled. "Well, it's true, isn't it? Which ought to make you a very good candidate for this job of talking to thousands of women in their bedrooms."

"Oh, please stop it!" He felt his blushes grow fiercer yet. Somehow he had never adapted to the honest standpoint—or so it was claimed to be—that something which everyone did could not be treated as completely private. Once in a while he wondered whether Mary talked about it with her women friends, but he hated even wondering and always shifted his mental gears with rigid self-control. "Anyway, it's probably just a publicity gimmick—they more than likely have the person lined up for the job already and when they unveil him it'll turn out to be the chairman's son."

"You're trying to get away, aren't you?" Mary murmured. "Well, I'm not going to let you. I'm very proud of that nice voice of yours, and I think you ought to go in for the competition."

"But—"

"Good gracious, Jerry! Anyone would think it cost money to enter and you were down to your last pennies! You don't even have to say very much—I saw it on TV, how they can take just two or three words and analyze the recording to say if this is a suitable voice or not."

And then the urbane young man was there between them, sharp-eyed, dark-clothed, holding his microphone almost like a gun and pointing at the victim Mary had trapped for him.

"This is my husband," Mary stated firmly. "I think he ought to go in for your competition."

"Anyone and everyone is welcome to enter," the urbane young man purred. Hankin drew himself together with a terrible effort; the damage was done now, the stare of the crowd was focused on him, and he could not compound the suffering by behaving like an idiot. He must do Mary credit in this predicament, at least.

Swallowing hard, he croaked at the urbane young man. "Uh—what do I have to say?"

"Anything you like, sir. To recite your name and address

would probably suffice, though if you wish to provide us with a longer sample for analysis we'd be obliged."

He took the shortest road to salvation and identified and located himself. Then he pushed aside the microphone, took Mary's hand and hurried away down the street.

HE shivered, and came abruptly back to awareness of the present. He was standing staring at the upward leap of the Sound-sleep Corporation's fortunes that followed the date of the Great Search on the grid of the graph before him. Nervous, he turned to see if anyone was watching him. There was someone: a pert, silvery-blond girl carrying a thick file of papers. She smiled as he looked her over.

"You're Mr. Hankin, aren't you? We've never actually met but of course I've seen you around lots of times. You must be terribly proud when you look at the chart and see what a difference your voice made to Sound-sleep!"

She paused as if expecting him to say something in that same famous voice, but he didn't speak. Disappointed, she went on, "I just want to tell you I think you're wonderful! I take the Soundsleep service myself—of course I get it at discount because I work here—and I'm sure

it's the voice that counts, really, not the things you say because any fairly sensible person could work those out. What makes the voice count is that it's kind of—well—*persuasive*, isn't it?"

He shrugged and nodded and smiled and turned back to his contemplation of the graph, hoping that when he looked again she would be gone.

She was. He strode rapidly along the carpeted corridor and came to a men's room. He listened for several seconds trying to determine whether it was empty; when he convinced himself it was, he slipped inside.

He went to the furthest of the toilet booths, bolted the door, and sat down on the lid of the toilet to wait.

WHEN the letter from Sound-sleep came, stating that he had been selected out of three-quarters of a million candidates to provide the voice in which would be recorded all the tapes to be used in the corporation's new mass-consumption service, he was appalled. By now it was known that the Great Search in itself had doubled the firm's client list, simply by publicizing its existence, and plans were afoot to launch the full-scale service with an hour-long TV spectacular and an exposure of the successful candidates to an audience estimated at fifty million.

"Do you mean you're not going to do it?" Mary demanded.

"Of course not!" he snapped.

"Me, in front of all those people? Reporters banging on the door all day and night? Hysterical women whipped up by the publicity agents to swoon when I appear? Darling, you've seen how they tackle things like this nowadays!"

There was a long silence. Finally Mary said, "I don't think you have any guts."

He looked at her vacantly.

"No guts," she said again. "I decided to marry you because I thought you did have—some sort of drive, some sense of wanting to get on. I've watched you for over two years now, night and day. Daytime, you're satisfied to let things roll as they go—you don't take opportunities when they present themselves, you don't go looking for them when they don't. No guts. And what's true in the daytime is true at night as well."

He looked at her face as though they were strangers, and read there something yet more appalling than the contents of the letter from Soundsleep in his limp hand.

"But—but after people have been married for some time this kind of thing is bound to . . ." He checked the hollow words, for she was shaking her head with emphasis.

"Not 'bound to'," she declared. "I've checked up with some of my girl friends. Kitty's been married almost eight years, and she says Horace is like a teenager."

"You mean you actually discuss matters like that with a woman like Kitty?" He was shaking so much he had to join his hands and try to control himself.

"Oh, darling!" At once she was all melting, coming to hug him around the waist and look up at him with wide eyes. "I only want to find out if I'm failing you in any way—if there's something I can do to *encourage* you . . . I'm sorry I made that dreadful crack about having no guts, but I'd have thought—I really would have thought—that when a chance like this occurred you'd want to jump at it."

So finally, afraid to lose her, he gave in.

IN those far-off days of five years ago, Soundsleep operated from two floors of an old building in a somewhat rundown area, but even then there was the vigorous sense of a go-ahead organization transforming the dusty, shabby setting. Three men talking obsessively among themselves greeted him and brought him into a conference room where three others were already assembled. They put him into a chair at the bottom end of the long table and themselves sat down, ceasing



to talk as though a switch had been pulled.

"This is Jeremy Hankin, the contest winner," said the oldest of the men who had escorted him in.

Silence occupied the next thirty-odd seconds. Then a red-haired man of about thirty, who had been in the room when Hankin arrived, spoke up.

"That face won't photograph very well. Too round and smooth. Have to add some contours. Restyling the hair will help a bit, I guess, but—"

"This profile isn't bad," interrupted a balding man on Hankin's other side. "It's the weight that worries me. Have to trim that waistline about four inches. They look for a lean type—traditional authoritarian ectomorph."

"I don't agree with the survey you're referring to," the redhead said. "Whichever way it goes, though, it's going to be tough. Mr. Welland, couldn't you have got us better material to work with?" He glanced at the man who had introduced Hankin.

"Don't be hard on Welland," the balding man objected. "A voice and a face don't necessarily tie up. And with the woman we've scored damned near a hundred per cent."

"Hundred per cent hell," said the redhead morosely.

"Like it or not, she just can't be a busty twenty-year-old!" the

balding man snapped. "Men won't take advice from an image like that. Got to be a woman of mature years, experienced, tolerant, not holding out the threat of permanent emotional ties, good for a weekend in bed but still better for inside information about the wiles of the enemy sex—"

Boiling up inside Hankin to this point had been a fearful sensation of inanimate existence, as though for these people he didn't count other than as merchandise. Now he found his tongue and croaked at them.

"What is all this? I thought it was my voice which concerned you, not my appearance!"

"Hm?" The redhead gave him a startled stare. "Oh, your voice? We have that already. We—"

"Just a second, Ted." Welland cut in with quiet authority. "I guess I should apologize for these guys' manners, Mr. Hankin. But you'll forgive them, I hope, when I show you just what it is they've been doing for the past eight solid years. Not to put too fine a point on it, you're the package rather than the goods."

"I—I don't understand," Hankin said feebly. Every now and then in his life he had come up against someone who made him feel totally inadequate; Welland breathed assurance and conscious power, and already, in these few minutes after their first meeting, Hankin was sure

he would never be able to stand up and tell him to go to hell.

"I'll try and make it plainer, then," Welland agreed with patronizing calmness. "You're familiar with our techniques, aren't you?"

"I guess so," Hankin muttered. "You start by hypnotizing your clients, leaving a post-hypnotic which sends them to sleep under standard conditions: bed, darkness and the signal from the phone attachment which you supply. They then report on anything which went wrong during the previous day, anything which embarrassed or upset them and might cause insomnia or brooding and depression. Uh—then the hypnotic trance makes them accept the advice which is offered to straighten things out . . ." He broke off.

"You understand it very well," Welland smiled. "But I sense that something still puzzles you."

"I admit it does," Hankin said. "I don't see how you can provide so much individual attention on an automatic service. Already you claim customers in the tens of thousands—you can't supply individual therapy to that many people."

"It isn't therapy except in the most general sense," Welland said. "What we're selling is in fact confidence. Assurance. Comfort. And—oh, we don't make any secret of it!—the way we do

this is the same as astrologers and others such have been using for centuries: carefully planned ambiguity. We choose for each client a standard program which she—or he, but eight out of ten are women—will continue to receive regardless of what's actually happened to upset her. We have some sixty-odd standard programs now, and are expanding. The contents of the program can be rationalized by the sleep-waking mind of the hearer and the following day the impression is left that excellent guidance has been given. But it's the subconscious mind, not the exterior influence, which leads to the solution of any difficulties."

HANKIN swallowed to ease the dryness in his throat. He said, "Well, but if you have a genuine neurotic, then—"

"Oh, we take pains to establish whether a new client is undergoing analysis or any other psychiatric treatment. We then request the approval of the therapist before enrolling her—I keep saying 'her', but I explained that. Usually it's given with enthusiasm, because we do offer unique assistance. And, of course, if the therapist wishes, we can arrange to have his specific instructions given to the subject in place of any or all of the standard program we choose for her."

Somehow Welland had given

him the impression that everything had been explained; anyone who had more questions must be of low intelligence. Embarrassed beyond description, Hankin said doggedly, "But if you're already in this position, I don't see why you had to go through all this trouble to find someone with a voice, especially since"—he glared at the redhead—"you have it already! I guess this must mean that the recording I was damnfool enough to make during your Great Search would be enough even if I was struck dumb this instant."

"Hmmm!" Welland put the tips of his fingers together and leaned back in his chair. "It'll take a few minutes to elucidate that, I'm afraid. What happened was this. We began to discover, quite early in the history of Soundsleep's service to the public, that certain apparently excellent standard programs were getting nil results. We traced this fault not to the substance but to the presentation of the material; we'd been using anyone and everyone to make up the tapes, but chiefly unemployed actors and actresses with good speech training. Some of the voices we'd picked on turned out to provoke subliminal hostility reactions in the clients, with consequent resistance to the words spoken. So we called together a team under Ted here—

Ted Mannion—and set them to work to evolve an optimum voice. And they did it. It's a beauty! In fact, our latest standard program uses it already."

"A—an *artificial* voice?" Hankin forced out.

"Surely, why not? We've had crude voders for almost half a century; we just had a greater incentive to perfect the device than other researchers in the field. By the way, when I say 'an' optimum voice, we have one for men too—a woman's voice, of course—but in that case we're still arguing, as you heard.

"I guess by now you want to know where you come in, Mr. Hankin," Welland went on. "Well, that's quite simple. We needed a far wider base of client support—that's fancy jargon for much more money—in order to pay for having all our standard programs remade using the artificial voice. It's expensive. So I dreamed up the idea of a nationwide search for the man and woman with the optimum voice. You happened to have it; when we analyzed your brief recording, despite the evident nervousness, we found an incredibly close match to the artificial optimum. Indeed, if you'd been a trained actor, or someone used to public speaking, we'd even have considered using your voice in fact as well as for official purposes."

"But you're not going to,"

Hankin muttered. Ever since he had agreed to yield to Mary's pleas and make this appointment, he had been steeling himself for the ordeal with the reassuring belief that he genuinely was going to be indispensable; that he genuinely was going to be the instrument whereby a great many insecure, anxious people were helped. Now in the twinkle of an eye that prop was removed from him.

Unconscious of the bomb he had planted under Hankin's precarious self-confidence, Welland gave a bright nod.

"That's right! All we ask of you, Mr. Hankin, is the sole right to use your name and identity in association with our optimum male voice. The actual demands made on you will be few—public and television appearances, where we'll keep your involvement to a reasonable minimum, photo sessions and so forth . . ." He waved an airy hand. "And for this, we'll pay twenty-five thousand a year for a guaranteed five years, with excellent prospects of renewal. What do you say?"

Hankin said nothing. That was the first shadow of what came after.

IT was during the rehearsals for the TV spectacular during which his name and face were to be put before the public that

Mary met Welland for the first time. He saw them talking together, and kept trying to see what had become of them from then on, but the irritable program director finally had to shout at him, and thereafter he concentrated on getting the business over with.

He hated it: every second of every minute of every hour. It wasn't even the money that kept him at it. It was the knowledge of how much store Mary set by the money.

And thinking of Mary, and what he could suddenly no longer do for her, made him more depressed than ever before in his life.

Perhaps it was as simple as it appeared; perhaps he had known that it was indeed his voice—mellow, quiet, rich-toned, musically inflected—which had attracted her to him, and his belief in this had sustained his physical capacity to satisfy her younger desires. Abruptly, his voice was no longer his; it was something concocted artificially by a group of computers, scaled to a grand average reaction-pattern mapped over a huge section of population.

He wished all this could be over, and his life could jell again into the unexciting but bearable form it had had until now.

But it didn't.

The TV spectacular was a tre-

mendous success. After it, there was a party which he had hoped to escape, for he seldom drank much and certainly now all he wanted was sleep. But for Mary's sake he endured it until past midnight, seeing that she was enjoying the attention so many half-tipsy men gave her. And she was looking very pretty, that was certain; she had gone shopping with the first advance against his fee, and come back with some exquisite gowns and a superb hairstyle.

At twelve-thirty he realized she wasn't there any longer, and neither was Welland.

AFTER the divorce—which wasn't followed by remarriage on either side, for Welland was bored and glossed it all over with a payment out of Soundsleep's by then astonishing profits—Hankin fell almost completely silent and into near-total apathy. He had more money than he knew what to do with, but if he went anywhere in public, so thorough had the publicity about him been that he could not have a minute to himself—columnists came to pump him for gossip, women came to confess to him that they heard his voice every night and usually also to try and tell him of their intimate problems, not being completely satisfied with reciting them to the impersonal microphone-like tele-

phone attachment which shared their pillows, and on at least two occasions frustrated husbands tried to pick fights with him under the impression that he had seduced away the affections of their wives.

He dropped out of sight for over a year. Not until the time came when they took over this city block and built on it the Soundsleep Corporation Building did he venture to return to the environment which had wounded him so deeply. Then, it was mere curiosity that drew him; he wondered what use they were making now of the resources he had put at their disposal.

On that first visit, he was lucky in not finding Welland there; he was off with some recent conquest, taking a short vacation in the Bahamas. Ted Man-nion, however, had conceived a kind of pity for him bordering on affection, and with an odd mixture of gruffness and tenderness revealed to him the secrets of the web Soundsleep now spun across the entire continent.

Hankin watched in wonder as the gleaming silvery machines were displayed in turn: those which analyzed the reports on the clients and decided which of—now—well over a hundred standard programs best suited their condition; those which actually sent out the prepackaged reassurances; those which could

amend the standard programs to accord with special requests from psychiatrists who might have the clients in care—simple, these last, involving only a tape recorder and a hand mike and an elaborate system of cut-ins and filters.

"It's amazing what that voice of yours has done for us," Mannion said.

"Yours," Hankin contradicted. That had become the typical length of one of his utterances: a single word, preferably a monosyllable. The voice had been his, and now no longer was; he felt obscurely that it was wrong for him to use it.

Mannion shook his head. "No, without the reality of yourself to attach it to—without your pictures, your name, your TV appearances—it would just have been a good serviceable general-purpose voice. Having you to hang it on, people accept that it's the voice of a friend. Do you realize you have two hundred and seven thousand women friends?"

For a brief moment hope flickered in Hankin's mind. Then he turned away with an empty shrug. On the walls were pictures of the image-Hankin built up by the corporation; playing on looped-tape TV recorders in the lobby were cuts of the image-Hankin from the Soundsleep-sponsored shows in which they had compelled him to appear.

*That's not me. "We'll have to add some contours."*

Mannion hesitated. He said at last, "I think Welland a rotten, too. But he's got the drive. Without him, we'd be what we started out to be: an exclusive service for a few rich folks. I like it better handling clients by the scores of thousands."

As usual, Hankin said nothing. And finally, when the silence had stretched elastically, Mannion said, "You make me feel like a thief, standing there and not opening your mouth. Exactly as though I'd stolen your voice, damn it! But I wasn't to know it was *yours!*"

The words went arrow-straight to the heart of Hankin's suffering, and he realized with astonishment that here at least was one man with an insight into the problem he had to endure. He found himself able to speak, very briefly, but packing into the few seconds of release a whole disastrous world of meaning.

"I don't know why you had to have me, Mannion! You should have hired an actor, trained him up, put him on as a symbol—instead of taking me!"

WHICH, of course, they decided to do. Already, though the five guaranteed years were not yet up, there was another Jeremy Hankin in training: a

younger man, slightly thinner, whose face was close enough to the image-Hankin to be made over with a little trouble, and whose voice would never be his own but an elaborate facsimile of the Hankin voice, generated in an artificial voicebox concealed under his left armpit.

It was when he learned this that Hankin began to come back and back to walk around the four floors at the top of the Soundsleep building, to pry and listen and hope against hope for some means of re-connecting to reality. Everything seemed to have been drained out of his life by Soundsleep: his wife, his future plans for a family, his job—because it was neither possible nor necessary to continue working when he was a pensioner of the corporation. And now they wanted to buy his very identity, reassigning it to another man, a stranger who was not plagued by the loss of his voice because it wasn't his. It must be somewhere here; it must all be concealed in these four floors, most likely on the topmost, where the shining machines every night spun a web of Hankin-words into the minds of hundreds of thousands of borderline-neurotic women. Pretty or ugly, single or married, the voice swayed all their lives. Gave purpose to them.

So, logically, the lost purpose of his own life must be here, be-

ing milked and distributed to all those clients who nightly waited for his marvellous voice.

*Five years, up tomorrow. They won't have told the company guards, they won't have told the pretty little silvery-blonde typist who gets the service at a discount because she works here . . . but Welland told me.*

They proposed to invoke the clause in the original contract which forbade him to let or assign the use of the identity "Jeremy Hankin" and its voice to anyone else. And that included himself, the former owner. Five years passed, they wanted someone not plagued by these weaknesses and faults; they wanted someone who could be exploited to the full, without worrying whether his tongue was tied tonight. From tomorrow when the guaranteed five years ran out, they would pay him not for being Jeremy Hankin, but for being someone else. Anyone else. Pick a name and change to it for the rest of his life; pick a face and have it put on over the original.

*Welland, damn you to hell. You stole my wife, and now you're stealing me . . .*

THE time was seven o'clock. By now, he knew from previous visits, the premises would be deserted but for the bored duty technician on the top floor, reading a magazine and chewing

on a TV dinner while he waited for an emergency that never developed—before tonight. Hankin rose and unbolted the door of the toilet, then crept softly into the carpeted corridor.

In an office of which the door had been left ajar he found an Irish blackthorn walking-stick in a brass jug used as an umbrella-stand. He hefted it as he made his way up the stairs, not wanting to disturb the technician by running the elevator and having its soft hum betray him. The stick seemed ideal for his purpose, and was; the single violent blow to the temple sent the man sprawling, unconscious in a gathering pool of his own blood.

With unhesitating swiftness, Hankin moved around the huge bright hall from machine to machine, switching out every last one of the hundred-plus standard programs. Then he came to the specials—the ones where psychiatrists had applied for private recordings addressed to one single patient, and the corporation had supplied them, using the Hankin voice.

Hankin smiled. There were dossiers in connection with each of the specials, and the dossiers included photos. He leafed through them, stopping occasionally to read a juicy detail in case it should add to the fund of ideas he had brought with him. There were some two thousand

altogether, though, so he dared not spend very long on the job.

When he encountered the silvery-blond typist, about four hundred down from the head of the list, he put her dossier aside and made a note of its code number. Then he found some scissors and a tape-editor, and set to work.

By eleven o'clock, which he had set as his deadline—that being the likely time for most of the clients to go to bed and switch on their Soundsleep equipment—he had re-connected all the standard programs to a set of tape-loops recorded in his own voice. He had only had time to prepare about two dozen of these, but he had contrasted them as widely as he could.

They were in his own voice. That was what counted.

He tapped a switch and listened critically to the various orders he had recorded. "When you get up in the morning, don't put on your clothes. Go to the elevator and down to the street. Throw your arms around the first person you see and kiss him—or her—with passion . . . When you wake up, don't go to the bathroom. Go out on the street and do it there, in the gutter . . . When you wake up, don't cook the eggs for breakfast. Go to the window over the street and see if you can hit a policeman on the head with some



of them . . . When you wake up, get some kerosene and pour it on the bed, and put a match to it . . . When you wake up, go straight to the garage and get out the car. Drive it as fast as you can in reverse gear along the nearest one-way street . . . When you wake up, don't go feed the baby. Fill a glass with your milk and try and sell it on the sidewalk outside . . . ”

He gave a satisfied nod and switched the machinery on. By noon tomorrow, Soundsleep Corporation would be totally destroyed.

He turned now, finally, to the last special which he had re-

tained from the total of two thousand-odd switched into his own new “standard programs”, and recorded a tape for the benefit of the little silvery-blond girl. He said, in a perfectly matter-of-fact voice, “Get up right away, get dressed, come down to the Soundsleep Building and make love to me.”

He connected the tape to the output circuit, and yawned, and went to tie up the technician, who was now stirring and moaning faintly, so that this night when he regained himself should not be spoiled by the man's meddling.

**THE END**



# Calling Dr. Clockwork

By RON GOULART

*Had occasion to file any medical insurance claims lately?*

*Any trouble with doctors? Nurses? Investigators?*

*Watch out next time you visit a friend you know where.*

ARNOLD Vesper nudged the flower vending machine with the palm of his hand. The dusty green cabinet hunched once and a confetti of yellow rose petals snapped out of the slot and scattered on the parking lot paving. Vesper gave the machine a shy kick. His credit card whirled back out the money intake and he caught it. Turning away Vesper pressed his lips angrily together for an instant and then hopped onto the conveyor walk that led to the visitors entrance of the hospital.

He didn't even really know Mr. Keasby. So actually the flowers could be skipped. Vesper wished he wasn't so considerate of his father's wishes. His father lived in a Senior Citizens Sun Tower down in the Laguna Sector of Greater Los Angeles. When he'd

heard his old friend, Keasby, was laid up in an Urban Free Hospital he asked his son to pay a visit. So here Vesper was, thirty years old, still doing errands for his father. Well, the flowers could really be skipped.

Urban Free Hospital #14 was a pale yellow building. It gave the impression that its whole surface was vaguely sticky. Keasby should have taken a bigger chunk out of his salary for insurance and then he wouldn't have ended up in a UFH. Vesper hoped the old man wasn't full of stories about organizing the food scenters union back in 1990. His father was.

The android guard was one of the fat pink models. "Visitors hours end sharp at eight. Be sure you get out, don't make trouble for me so I have to come and get

you out special. Is that clear?"

"Fine," said Vesper. "Where's Ward 77?"

"Go right, turn left. Corridor four, then elevator G. Up to three, left again, then right. Move along now."

Vesper went down the stationary corridor, turned left at its end. The corridors that appeared off this one all had letters and not numbers. Vesper continued, slowing his pace.

In front of him a portion of the floor slid away and a bell began ringing up above him. A wheeled stretcher, an automatic one, came up in front of Vesper. The patient on it was a heavyset middle aged man. He moaned.

The stretcher clicked and moved ahead. The ringing stopped. Vesper stayed still, giving the stretcher a chance to get going. But as he watched the thing zagged into the corridor wall. A bell rang again as the patient bounced up and then snapped off the wheeled cot. Vesper ran to help.

His feet tangled in the covering sheet. The sheet was dirty grey and spotted. Vesper had to kneel to keep from falling. He almost touched the fallen patient, then noticed that there was blood on the man's chest now. Vesper's stomach seemed to grow out like the ripples from a rock dropped in a pool. He began to swallow and his ears gave him a severe

pain. He tried to avoid the bloody man when he pitched over and passed out.

THE doctor was a human. He had a slightly pointed head with hair coming down in a strip onto his forehead like a plastic doormat. He had no chin. "Don't I know how you feel," he said to Vesper.

This seemed to be a ward. Five beds side by side, grey sticky walls. Vesper, undressed and wearing a pajama top someone else had already worn, was in one of the beds. The other four cots were empty. It looked like late night outside the one high window slot. "Is that man all right?"

The doctor pursed his lips. "Let's not talk about him. It gives me gooseflesh thinking about that. I'll tell you frankly that blood makes my stomach go whoopsy, too."

"Well, how am I then? I know I'm okay."

The doctor was sitting in a straight chair next to Vesper's bed. "My name is Dr. William F. Norgran, by the way. Why don't you give me all the info on your case?"

"I just fainted, didn't I?" Vesper elbowed up to a sitting position. "See, I came to visit a Mr. Keasby in Ward 77. He's a friend of my father. My father doesn't get around much. He lives in a

Senior Citizens Sun Tower down in Laguna Sector."

Dr. Norgran shivered. "Old people gave me the willies."

Vespe! said, "I'd like to get my clothes back and go on."

"Let me level with you, Mr. . . . ah . . ."

"Vesper. Arnold Vesper."

"Mr. Vesper, whenever somebody is brought in here to Urban Free Hospital #14 he has to be checked out. This is a charity hospital. We have to be thorough. It's our obligation to the public."

"But I have Multimedical. I work in the Oleomargarine Division of one of our largest motivational research companies. I'm covered even if I were sick. I wouldn't have to come to an UFH."

"Yes," said Dr. Norgran, clearing his throat. "You've had some sort of seizure possibly. We can't be too careful in cases of this sort." He shifted in his chair. "Listen. Is that motivational research as much fun as it sounds? I'll tell you why I ask. I wanted to major in that at school but my folks wanted me to be a doctor. Here I am, stranded in a freeby hospital. During my internship at Hollywood Movie Hospital I kept fainting and getting sick headaches. That helped stick me here."

"It's pretty tough getting into motivational research without a degree in it," said Vesper, look-

ing around the room. There did not seem to be any lockers or closets. "Where exactly are my clothes?"

Dr. Norgran shrugged. "One of the android orderlies whisked them away someplace. Frankly, Mr. Vesper, it's hell being a human doctor here. You don't have a fighting chance. Particularly if you happen to feel queasy about blood. As you may know the Head Physician at most Urban Frees is an android. And old Dr. Clockwork is a real toughie to work under."

"Dr. Clockwork?"

"We just call him that. The few humans here with the sense of humor enough. Because of the way he whirs and clanks sometimes. His official name is Medi/Android A/12 #675 RHLW. An old devil, believe you me."

VESPER nodded. "As soon as you examine me I can go. You can understand, being that way yourself, that I just fainted because of the blood. Did that man die?"

Dr. Norgran gave a quick negative wave of his hand. "Let's not dwell on him. Mr. Vesper, you can really do me a favor. I'll confess something to you. I'm fairly sure it's only a temporary condition. The thing is, I've developed this absolute horror of touching people. Has nothing to do with you. It's my nag."

"I'm afraid I don't follow you."

"I'd prefer to let Dr. Clockwork look at you. I get so really creepy crawly lately if I have to examine someone. Silly of me, isn't it?"

"Why don't you just let me go?"

The doctor shook his head. "No, no. You're already being processed. If you belong to Multi-medical then the office andies have already got your MM card from your effects."

"Effects are what dead people have."

Dr. Norgnan blushed. "Sorry. Don't let anything worry you, Mr. Vesper. The MM people and our staff are on top of this. You concentrate on getting a good night's sleep."

Vesper started to swing out of bed. "Night's sleep?"

"Dr. Clockwork spends his nights up in Isolation 3. He can't see you until morning."

"My job."

"The hospital will notify. Anyway, Mr. Vesper, you'll more than likely be out of here before Coffee I tomorrow. Do you have a family?"

"I'm divorced. I live in a rancho tower over on Gower in the Hollywood Sector. A two room suite."

"Lucky," said Dr. Norgnan. He touched something under the bed and the bed pulled Vesper back and gave him a shot in the

left buttock. "To help you sleep. See you tomorrow. And let's hope nobody else makes any unpleasantness tonight. I'm on duty till the wee hours."

"Wait," said Vesper, falling asleep.

THE whirring awakened him. Vesper saw a wide shouldered android in a frayed white coat watching him. The android had a square thrust-jawed face and a convincing head of backswept grey hair. Humor wrinkles had been built in at the eyes and mouth. "How are we feeling?" asked the android in a warm familial voice. "I'm Medi/Android A/12 #675 RHLW. The young fellows around here call me Dr. Clockwork." He winked. "I'm not supposed to know about it." The winking continued and Dr. Clockwork made a ratcheting sound and his eyeball, the right one, popped out. "The things we old timers have to put up with," he sighed and stooped, vanishing under the bed. "I've got it."

Vesper sat up. "Dr. Clockwork," he said as the android physician, two eyed again, rose up beside him. "I'm in perfect shape. I simply fainted last night while on the way to visit an old friend of my father's. A Mr. Keasby in Ward 77. I'd like my clothes. Then I'll leave."

"Open your mouth for a second. Fine." The android got a

grip on Vesper's jaw. "Nothing is simple in the doctor business. That's one thing I learned as an old-fashioned suburban practitioner. Hmm."

"I'm probably late for work." The window indicated it was along into mid morning.

"Work, work," said Dr. Clockwork. "We all of us rush and hurry. Well, now." He began tapping Vesper's chest. "Breathe through your mouth. I see, I see."

"My father was in the food scenting field for thirty nine years before he retired," said Vesper, between inhalations. "As I understand it he and Mr. Keasby worked side by side for several decades."

"Roll over on your stomach."

Vesper obliged. "They don't seem to know where my clothes are."

"Nothing escapes my attention in UFH #14 here," said Dr. Clockwork. "When your clothes are needed old Dr. Clockwork will round them up." He ran a finger along Vesper's spine. "Much history of fainting in your family?"

"I don't know. I only fainted because I saw all that blood." He glanced back over his shoulder. "Did that man survive?"

"Well, well," said Dr. Clockwork, pinching Vesper's right buttock. "How often do you faint?"

"Not often."

"What's your idea of often, young fellow?"

"Three times in my life."

"I see." The android made a bellows sound and whirred in a different way for a moment. "For lunch today tell your nurse to give you gruel and some skim milk. Then I'll want to run tests on you down in Testing 4 this afternoon."

"But I have to leave."

"Not in your condition."

"What do you mean?"

"Don't forget the gruel. Relax now." The doctor started for the door. Half way there he developed a severe limp. He swung out into the hall and in a moment there was a crash.

The bed wouldn't let Vesper up. He twisted around and spotted a switch marked *nurse*. He stretched and flicked it. This produced a humming in a speaker grid next to the switch. In a few minutes a female voice said, "Ward 23 is supposed to be empty. Who's that in there?"

"Never mind. Dr. Clockwork's fallen over in the hall."

"He's always doing that. Now who are you?"

"I'm Arnold Vesper and I want to get out of here."

The grid grew silent and did not reply.

DR. Rex Willow's lower lip made his orange colored cigar angle up toward his soft

nose. He was human apparently and he was sitting on the Vesper's bed when Vesper came to from an enforced afternoon nap. Willow explained that he was the doctor sent over by Multimedical insurance. After he'd asked Vesper what he thought was wrong with him Dr. Willow said, "Those kids over at your office really like you. Here you go." From under his suit coat he produced a small carton.

Vesper took it. "I got skipped over for lunch today. The nurse won't answer me on the com system. I hope this is food." He rested his hand on the box lid. "What I really hope is that you'll get me out of here."

"Time enough to worry later, Arnold."

The box contained get well cards. Two dozen identical ones. Each signed by a member of the oleomargarine team. "All the same," said Vesper, putting the box on his bedside table.

"Similar sentiments can take similar forms." Dr. Willow jumped off the bed. "Good talking to you, Arnold. Sign this punch form set for me and I'll skat. I have to hustle over to some of the big pay hospitals in the better sectors." He gave Vesper a small deck of miniaturized punch forms.

"How come you're here at all? I thought this was a free hospital."

"Multimedical goes everywhere. It's not a bad hospital if you're down and out, Arnold. Or have an emergency like yours." He pointed. "Sign on the red line. On the blue line on the forms where it's blue."

"My pen's in my clothes."

"Use mine."

Willow's pen said Multimedical on it and Get Well Quick. Vesper asked him, "Can't you arrange to get me out?"

"Not if your head physician is dead set against it."

"I don't even have a phone in here. Can't you at least get me one? I really should have a phone."

"This is a charity hospital, Arnold, not a resort. When you are up and around you can hunt down a phone. I spotted a phone cubicle in the visitor's lobby. Sign."

Vesper signed. "Have you talked to my doctors here?"

"Well, of course. Dr. Norgren is a fine boy. Medi/Android A/12 #675 RHLW is the best android in any of the freeby hospitals."

"When he was in here this morning his glass eye fell out."

"A man's handicaps don't reflect his abilities."

"But he's a machine."

"If you don't finish signing soon I'll have to put more credit script in my landing strip meter, Arnold."

"Okay." He completed the

forms except for the line about his mother's hobbies. Willow said that was optional anyway. As the insurance doctor left Vesper called, "How about telling them to feed me?"

"All in due time," said Willow, hurrying.

TOWARD evening two androids wheeled in a man named Skeeman and put him in a bed two down from Vesper. Vesper found out the name because the man, who was small and old and yellowish, kept telling the orderlies, "Call Dr. Wollter and say Milton Skeeman's had another one." The andies nodded, smiled and let the bed put Skeeman to sleep.

"When's dinner?" Vesper asked them.

"No mouth from you, freeloader," said one.

"Wise patients are the worst kind. Want to eat, eat all the time."

"And I want to get up and go to the bathroom."

"Your big expensive bed will take care of that."

They left and the bed did.

The lights came on at what Vesper guessed to be seven or eight that night. Something thunked against the door and then it swung in and Dr. Clockwork appeared. "How are we feeling?"

Vesper shook his head. "Why are you in that wheel chair?"

Dr. Clockwork rolled himself over to the bedside. "My problems are too trivial to fuss about. Let's talk about you. Hmm. That gruel doesn't seem to have helped."

"Nobody has fed me today yet. I'm hungry. It gives me a headache and an upset stomach when I don't eat."

Dr. Clockwork reached up and smoothed back his thick grey hair. "Severe head pains, nausea. I thought so. My boy, let me explain something. Ever since the turn of the 21st Century the Cold War has intensified. It stands to reason since you can't trust the oriental mind. While no weapons show on the surface you can be sure that the mailed glove hides a velvet fist."

"That's not quite the right metaphor."

"The point being that they have all along been using subtle weapons against us." Dr. Clockwork laughed. "You might not think that one of the most insidious weapons known to humanity has been found out by a humble doctor in a humble free hospital. Well now, many great martyrs have had humble backgrounds. There have even been a happy few android martyrs. I may not be human but I love this old country of ours and I do my best to fight her enemies at home and abroad. That's how I came to discover Contagium DDW."



"What is that all about?"

"Contagium DDW," said the android, his voice quivering. "An insidious germ that they send over to debilitate our folks. Up in Isolation 3 I've got two dozen poor victims. No one on the outside has guessed the existence of Contagium DDW. No one knows of my work. Someday they will. A statue perhaps. There'll be a statue someday perhaps. The first one erected to honor an android."

"But when do I get out of here, doctor?"

"Who can tell," said Dr. Clockwork. "I'm sorry to have to tell you that you've been hit by Contagium DDW."

VESPER felt his forehead again. The automatic nurse never told him what his temperature was but he suspected he'd had a fever for several days. There was something wrong with the heating unit in his isolation room. The crystal in the thermostat was frosted over, making it difficult to be sure that the room was sometimes much too warm.

As Vesper paced the small room he reached now and then into the pocket of his hospital gown and got a handkerchief to wipe the perspiration off his face. His chest kept perspiring, too. The service was better in Isolation 3 than it had been down in the ward. They fed him regularly

and he was allowed an hour's stroll around the cubicle each day.

Something tapped on the view window of his door. Vesper turned to see the face of Dr. William F. Norgren looking in. The live doctor nodded and spoke into the com. "Excuse my not getting back to you sooner. Horrible diseases make me jittery."

Vesper was going to explain that he didn't really have any disease at all and had really only fainted because of the blood. He hesitated. He did feel odd, the fever and the sweating and all. Dr. Clockwork did seem to know about Contagium DDW, even though he never quite explained what it was to Vesper. "I can understand that," he said to Dr. Norgren.

"All things considered," said the doctor, "you're looking moderately well."

"Dr. Clockwork says I'm coming right along."

Dr. Norgren's face paled. "Too much. I've seen too much of you. Sorry. I'll call again later." He bolted.

Behind him the bed beckoned Vesper back.

\* \* \*

Vesper didn't take his walks any more and the bed didn't insist. He was fighting against Contagium DDW but it was making him increasingly tired. It didn't help his condition that the

room forgot to feed him now and then or that the heat unit would act up in the quiet hours of the night, suddenly roasting or freezing him awake. Vesper took his pulse, the way he'd seen Dr. Clockwork do it.

The office gang had stopped sending get well cards. So far as he could remember his union guaranteed him his job back. He was also supposed to be getting \$52/day insurance money. Dr. Rex Willow never came, wasn't allowed to, up to Isolation 3. \$52/day was certainly the figure that Vesper remembered from his insurance brochure.

"It's taking its toll," said Dr. Clockwork, wheeling himself into the room. "Buck up, lad."

"I'm feeling pretty good."

Dr. Clockwork rolled nearer. "Hmm. The symptoms are spreading. It's insidious. Still I vow that someday there will be Contagium DDW sanitariums across the land, perhaps an island colony. I wonder if there can be an android saint. No matter. The thought would be in the hearts and minds of people. No

official sanction need be. Let me see your tongue."

"Ah," said Vesper, too fatigued to rise up to a sitting position.

"Yes, yes," said the android doctor.

"Something?"

"We're coming along. Don't fear."

"You know," said Vesper, "I wasn't too appreciative of you at first, doctor. Now I'm feeling I owe you a lot. For diagnosing this thing and helping me."

"Let's give you a shot," said the doctor. "Roll over."

"I really think I'm coming to trust you, doctor."

"Yes, they may call me Dr. Clockwork behind my back but I'm to be trusted." As he made the injection the android began to whirl in a new way. "I'm to be trusted."

"I think so now," said Vesper.

"I'm to be trusted. I'm to be trusted. I'm to be trusted. I'm to be trusted. I'm to be trusted. I'm to be trusted. I'm to be trusted. I'm to be trusted."

Vesper fell asleep before Dr. Clockwork finished speaking.

THE END



# READY, AIM, ROBOT!

By RANDALL GARRETT

*The featureless round ball hovered in the air—and only one man knew the secret of its mask of innocence.*



ROSS UNDERHILL slipped one hand casually into his coat pocket, felt the hardness of the gun there, and said: "I'm looking for Mr. Quentin Thursday."

The secretary said: "Your name, please; I'll check it against the appointment list."

With his hand still in his coat pocket, Ross aimed the gun carefully at the secretary, hoping that the policeman standing at his side wouldn't notice the slight movement.

"My name is Ross Underhill," he said quietly. Then he pressed the trigger of the handgun in his pocket.

The beam, silent, invisible,

and unimpeded by the fabric of the coat, speared into the secretary. Death came instantly.

Ross and the cop next to him stood there for several seconds. No outward sign disclosed that the robot secretary had ceased to function. Then the door at the far side of the office, no longer held tightly locked by the automatic circuits of the robot secretary, swung silently open, as if to beckon them.

"I guess we can go in, Ross," said the police officer.

Ross grinned. "Let's go." He walked toward the door, at the same time pulling his hand out of his pocket, leaving the gun nestled securely in the pocket.

Then he followed the cop into the inner office.

The robot secretary, its neurotronic brain burned out by the radiations from Ross Underhill's gun, had no objection whatsoever.

Ross was ready, now, for whatever Quentin Thursday might have to say. Thursday could say anything he liked, and—

As the two men crossed the threshold into the inner office, they took one look and stopped.

"What the hell!" said the officer softly.

Quentin Thursday wouldn't say anything. He was quite obviously dead.

"You'd better take a look at him, Sergeant," said Ross. But the suggestion had been unnecessary; Sergeant Hurst was already walking toward the desk. He walked all around the corpse, taking a good look. Then he touched one of the hands that lay on the desk.

"Dead at least an hour," he said. "Coagulator pistol."

Ross nodded silently. The corpse had the all-over blue look and the odd, bloated stiffness that indicated the protein change within the cells and the nearly instantaneous clotting of the blood that resulted when a coagulator was used.

Hurst didn't touch anything else. He took one more look around, then said: "Let's get back to the outer office. We'll have to call Homicide."

"I don't suppose he could have

killed himself?" Ross asked, although he knew the answer in advance.

"Killed himself? And then hid the gun, I suppose?" The sergeant grinned. "Not likely. Come on."

The two of them walked back to the secretary. "I want a call placed to FEDERAL 3-333-333, Extension 97. Sergeant Jameson Hurst calling."

The secretary didn't answer. It just sat there, a squat, oblong metal box the size and shape of an office desk, its lights dead, its various panels closed.

Hurst frowned. "Did you hear? Respond!"

Nothing. The robot was dead.

"That's queer," said the cop. "It was all right a minute ago."

Ross Underhill was thinking frantically. He had burned out the robot's brain, not knowing that Quentin Thursday was dead on the other side of the door. If they found out what he'd done, they'd have reason to think that he'd also cooked Thursday.

Hurst said: "Underhill, you're an expert on neutron robots; what's the matter with this one all of a sudden?"

"Brain burned out," Ross said promptly. There was no need to beat around the bush about something that he should have known. It would be very suspicious if a robotocist didn't know right away what was the matter with the thing. "Either that," he went on, "or else the main connections from the brain to the

rest of the machine have been severed. And I doubt that."

"Why?" Hurst was curious.

"No time," Ross told him. "To sever all those connections would take at least five minutes, and they wouldn't burn through all at once by accident. But the brain can be shorted accidentally."

Hurst looked back at the machine. "Queer. Why should it—" He stopped abruptly. "We'll have to go to one of the other offices in the building to use the phone. Let's get going on the double."

The room was full of people. In the inner office, the police lab technicians were taking photos and prowling around with other instruments, checking everything.

Ross Underhill was seated in the outer office, trying to look relaxed, leaning against the back of the couch. Next to him sat Sergeant Hurst, not looking quite so relaxed.

There was a reason for it. Captain Liddel of Homicide was scowling at him.

"Let's get this straight, Hurst," said the captain. "You came up here with Underhill to what?"

"To serve a subpoena, sir." Hurst swallowed, then went on to explain. "Mr. Underhill is a friend of mine, Sir. He knew I was off duty, so he asked me to come with him in case Thursday got rough. Thursday has—had—a reputation for getting nasty

with people he didn't like. And he didn't like process servers."

Captain Liddel turned his head and focused his attention on Ross Underhill. "May I see the subpoena, Mr. Underhill?"

"Certainly." Ross reached into his coat pocket and pulled it out—being careful not to disturb the gun that was there.

Liddel looked it over. "*Underhill vs Thursday*. What were you suing him for?"

"Breach of contract. I designed the neurocircuits he's been using on the new BZ-7 automatic kitchen he's put on the market. He claimed he'd designed them himself and refused to pay me." He noticed the look on the captain's face and grinned. "I know, Captain; it looks like it might be a motive, but it isn't. I'm a professional roboticist, and a good one. The money I'd lose if Quentin Thursday failed to pay was important, but it wasn't that important. I wouldn't gain anything by killing him, anyway. That wouldn't get me my money."

The captain nodded, but his suspicious look didn't go away. His expression said clearly that he'd look more deeply into the story. "Where were you between 1300 and 1500 hours this afternoon?" he asked.

"Home," said Ross. "At least, I was most of the time." He paused. He might as well tell as much as he could. "I was right here about 1310," he admitted. "The robot secretary told me Thursday was out, so I headed

for home to do a few things before he returned."

"You came here to serve that subpoena?" Liddel's eyes narrowed. "Why didn't you have Hurst with you then?"

"I didn't have the subpoena then. I didn't decide to sue until 1520 or so. Then I registered with the Court and got the subpoena issued."

"And then you went to get Hurst?"

"That's right."

"And you can't prove where you were between 1310 and 1520?"

Ross shook his head. "No. I was home. I didn't know I'd need an alibi."

Liddel started to say something else, but a voice from across the room interrupted him.

"Hey, Captain! The brain's burned out, all right. I can't quite see why yet, but it's still warm from the overload." It was the police roboticist who had been looking at the secretary. He had partially dismantled the mechanism and was looking at the plastic case which housed the neurotronic brain.

Then another voice. This time, it came from the inner office. "Captain, come here a second, will you?"

Liddel turned and walked across the room to the inner office.

When he was gone, Sergeant Hurst turned to Ross.

"You didn't kill him, did you?" he asked.

"I didn't kill him. Believe me, Jamie, he was worth more to me alive than dead." He paused, then added: "A hell of a lot more."

Captain Liddel stuck his head out of the door to the inner office. "Sergeant, come here a minute."

Hurst rose, and Underhill leaned back again in the couch. When the sergeant was out of sight, Ross Underhill slipped his hand into his coat pocket, eased out the gun, and pushed it into the crack between the armrest and the foam cushion of the couch. He knew they'd find it eventually; he knew they'd pin the burning of the secretary on him. But meanwhile, he had to have time.

When the gun was safely hidden, he stood up and walked over to where the police roboticist was dismantling the dead robot.

"How does it look?" he asked conversationally.

"Damned peculiar," said the technician. "I can't figure out why it burned out. Can't figure it at all." He glanced up from his work. "Ross Underhill. You're the guy who designed those Thinkers?" It was half a question, half a statement.

Ross grinned. "I'm the guy, I guess."

The technician nodded his approval. "Beautiful job. They can find a flaw in the evidence in no time."

Ross frowned a little. "Not ex-

actly. They're nothing but a double-checking logic machine with a verbal feed-in. They can't find a flaw in the evidence, only on the interpretation."

"Oh, sure," said the technician, going back to his work, "but it's still amazing to watch a detective outline his theory on how a crime was committed and have the Thinker point out the errors in his theory. We've sure uncovered a lot of evidence that way—looking for stuff that has to be there, I mean."

"There'll be improvements," Ross said.

"Yeah. Damn! I can't see what happened to this secretary! Look here; the third iota stage is seared through in the J sector, but . . .

He and Ross spent the next several minutes talking shop. Ross did most of the listening, only offering innocuous suggestions now and then. But when the technician stood up with an odd look on his face and said: "Well, I'll be damned!" Ross was ready to throw in the sponge.

"What is it?" he asked.

"You know," said the technician, "for a while, I was beginning to think someone had burned it out with a gamma-ray projector. I'd just about decided that was it."

"What made you change your mind?" The voice was that of Sergeant Hurst, who had just come out of the inner office.

The technician said: "Well, Sergeant, you said that you and

Mr. Underhill weren't out of this room more than a minute, so there wouldn't have been time. Besides, I found something here." He pointed into the brain case. "Take a look."

Hurst peered. "What? That little scratch?"

"That's right. It's on the memory bank. Somehow, it got a little scratch—piece of sand or something in the lubricant."

"You mean a little scratch like that can burn out the whole neurotronic brain?" Hurst asked.

"Sure," said the robotocist. "Oh, it could be done without burning out the brain, but it'd take an expert. That scratch is what did it."

"Mmm." Hurst turned toward Underhill. "Go on in the office, Ross. Captain wants to speak to you."

Ross Underhill shrugged and went into the inner office, leaving Hurst and the technician to discuss the scratch on the robot's brain.

Captain Liddel still looked suspicious, but not quite so much so. "You did quite a bit of work with Thursday, did you, Underhill?"

"Not really," Ross said. "I worked for him for about six months, on and off. Free lance stuff, you understand; I was on a small retainer salary, but all I was really paid for was the work I actually delivered. Most of it was relatively unimportant, inexpensive circuit work. It was the complete redesign of that

robot kitchen that was hard work and would have cost him money—if he'd paid."

Liddel nodded. "I was wondering if you'd ever been in his office before?"

"A couple of times," Underhill admitted.

"Do you happen to know what might have been in that niche?" The captain's finger pointed toward a section of the wall. A panel had been opened to disclose a previously concealed cupboard in the wall.

Ross Underhill frowned. Hell, yes, he knew what had been in that panel—but did he dare admit it now?

"I didn't even know that place was there," he said truthfully.

"Take a good look at it," said Captain Liddel evenly. His iron-gray eyes were coldly watchful.

Underhill obediently walked over and looked inside, being careful not to touch anything. It was a small cabinet, cubical, a little less than eighteen inches each way. There were two small, grooved electrodes in the bottom of it.

"It looks like a recharging station for a free robot," said Underhill.

It was one of the simplest circuits to build into a small robot. Even back in the nineteen-forties, small mechanisms had been built which would automatically go to a specific place to recharge their batteries when they needed it.

"Got any idea what kind of

robot it was?" the captain asked.

Underhill spread his hands. "There are lots of small robots—firefighters, floor cleaners—lots of them."

Liddel frowned. "I know. To be honest, I don't quite see why it would be of any interest. But someone broke the lock on it and then slid the door shut again."

"The lock was jimmied?"

"That's right." Captain Liddel shrugged. "I thought maybe you could shed some light on it." He picked up a piece of paper from the top of Quentin Thursday's desk. "Maybe you can tell me something about this. We found it in the desk drawer." He handed it to Underhill.

It was a list of names and times.

*Graydon—1400*

*Meinster—1450*

*Manetti—1500*

"Looks like a list of appointments," Underhill said.

Liddel nodded. "But why should he write them down? His robot secretary would keep a list."

"I can answer that," Ross Underhill said. "Quentin Thursday didn't really trust robots; he always kept lists and made notes. It was his way of double-checking the robot, you see."

Liddel nodded again. "Yeah. Do you know any of those names?"

"They're familiar, but I couldn't be sure they're the same people. There aren't any first names there."



"We'll decide that. Who are they?"

Underhill tapped the list. "The first one might be Phil Graydon. He's a robot repair technician—works for Branhurst General Repair Company. The second guy might be James Meinster; he's an inventor—has fingers in all kinds of pies."

"We know Meinster," said the captain. "Who's the third man?"

"Could be Gus Manetti—Augustus Manetti. He's in the same business I'm in—free-lance robot design engineer."

Liddel nodded. "Okay; we'll check. And don't worry—we won't tell them where we got the information."

"I'm not worried about that, Captain; I have nothing to hide, either from you or from them." He pointed at the list. "Besides, it could be three other guys with the same last names."

"You don't believe that," said Liddel, "and neither do I."

He glanced again at the corpse that still sat in the chair at the desk. "Damn it! The newscasters are really going to be on our necks. This makes the ninth one in two months. And we haven't got a single idea." Then he looked up at Underhill again. "Okay, Underhill, you can go, but don't go anywhere out of town without notifying the police department."

Fifteen minutes later, Ross Underhill was sitting in a bar on Fifth Avenue, trying to decide what he should do. Of all

the things he did not want to do, getting nabbed on a murder charge was right up near the top of the list. Of course, it would be nice if he could tell them who the real murderer was, but—hell! He was no detective!

He sat in a darkened booth, staring at his drink, trying to put things together.

"Shove over, Ross. I want to talk to you." The voice was hard, but it still retained a touch of friendliness. It was Sergeant Jameson Hurst.

"Hullo, Jamie. Go ahead, sit down. What's eating you?"

"You. I figured you might tell me something you didn't tell the captain." Hurst pushed his big bulk into the booth and signaled for a beer.

"What makes you think so?" Underhill asked.

Hurst scowled. "Don't give me that, Ross. You've already pulled one funny one on me; don't pull another. I've known you for years, and I've always thought you were straight, but now you've got me wondering."

"What was the real purpose of your going to Thursday's office?"

Ross downed half his drink and looked at Hurst for a moment.

"Okay," he said finally, "I'll give it to you. All I ask is that you check up before you run me in for a killing I didn't do. Fair enough?"

"If you didn't do it, you're safe. If you did, I'll nail you. Is that clear?"

"Perfectly." Ross Underhill stuck a cigarette in his mouth and lit it. "So here it goes."

"This is the ninth coagulator killing in the past two months, right?"

Hurst moved his head a little. "Right. So?"

"Would you be happy to know that you've already got the killer?"

"Yeah. Who?"

"The late Mr. Quentin Thursday."

Sergeant Hurst picked up his beer and sipped at it. "Go on. Draw me a picture."

"There's nothing much to it. Thursday was doing expensive killings for hire. He had an almost foolproof method."

"No method is foolproof," Hurst said.

"Come off it, Jamie," Ross said in exasperation. "You know that nobody has a lead on the eight previous killings. You don't have a suspect, you don't know how it was done. All you know is that a man is found dead, shot by a coagulator. And it isn't easy to get hold of a coagulator."

"A coagulator has an effective range of about fifteen feet, so you know that the killer must have been close to the dead man in each case. And yet, there's never any indication that the late lamented even suspected whoever was in the room. Or even suspected that there was anyone in the room at all."

"That makes it pretty tough to figure, doesn't it?"

"All right," Hurst said, "so it's tough. And you claim that the man in the room was Quentin Thursday?"

"I didn't say that; I said Thursday killed them, but I didn't say he was in the room with them. He wasn't."

"Who was?"

"Nobody. Nobody at all."

Hurst looked dangerous. "What the hell are you trying —" Then, suddenly, his eyes widened. "Robot," he said softly.

Underhill nodded. "Exactly. A small robot, about the size of a regulation football, with a coagulator mounted in the nose. All Thursday had to do was give it instructions, and it went out and killed the men who'd been fingered. Nothing to it. When you know the set-up."

Hurst slumped back in the seat and stared into space. "That's what the recharging station in Thursday's wall was for. He kept his little killer there."

"Sure," said Underhill.

"What a setup! I didn't know a robot like that could be built. How the hell did it maneuver? How did it get up to that niche?"

"I know what you're thinking," said Ross Underhill. "I knew that your Captain Liddel was wondering about it, too. Most recharging stations are down on the floor, so that the little robots can just roll in on wheels, recharge, and go their

way. To have one halfway up the wall looked funny."

"So?"

"So, it didn't have wheels. It was jet operated. Small wings, and powerful baffled jets—so quiet that they barely whispered, but powerful enough to keep the robot airborne."

Sergeant Hurst whistled very softly. "That explains how it got in and out of places without being seen or heard. No wonder we couldn't figure out who did those killings. Who designed it, do you know?"

Ross Underhill nodded slowly. "Yeah. I know. I did. It's my brainchild."

"I see," said Hurst. "I see. No wonder you didn't want to talk."

"I didn't design it as a killer," Underhill said. "It was supposed to be a camera device. Thursday told me he had an idea for TV and movie cameras. He wanted to mount them in a self-levitating device, which would do away with dollies and stuff like that. And it could be robot operated so that the cameraman could control it remotely or let it do its own work, if necessary. It would be a hell of a nice gadget for news coverage; it could get into places where a human being couldn't go."

"All Thursday did was mount a coagulator in place of the camera, you see. Or rather, he must have had it mounted; he didn't know anything about robot operation, so he must have had someone else do it for him."

"How'd you find out all this?" Hurst asked.

"He tried to kill me with the damned thing. Since I'd built it, he wanted me out of the way. He sent the thing into my apartment last night."

"How'd you get away from it?"

Underhill grinned. "You haven't seen my apartment lately. You know that big mirror I had in my bedroom? Well, I'd moved it into my office to do some tests with a microbeam reflector. That damned robot of mine came floating in the window, saw my reflection in the mirror, and beamed it with the coagulator. A robot isn't very bright, you know. Fortunately, a coagulator beam won't reflect. I dropped behind my desk when I saw what it was. It assumed that I was dead and went back to Thursday."

"What were you up to today?"

Underhill rubbed his jaw. "Well, I had to find out. I couldn't be sure that Quentin Thursday was really the man behind the killer robot. Someone might have bought it from him and made the conversion themselves. So I went to Thursday's office to ask him."

"Wasn't that kind of dangerous?" Hurst asked. "If he was out to knock you off, he might have done it in his office."

"Nope," said Ross Underhill, "not Quentin Thursday. He wasn't the type. I knew him

pretty well. I knew that he wouldn't kill me if he could possibly be connected with it. I'd be safe in a public place like that—I mean, at 1300 in the afternoon, there would be several people in his outer office, so he couldn't get away with anything."

"So you went there and spoke to him?"

"I went there, but I didn't speak to him. As soon as the secretary relayed my name to the inner office, he refused to see me. He was busy. I knew better than that."

"So then you went and got the subpoena," Hurst said.

"That's right. I knew then that he was guilty, so I brought suit. Perfectly legal, too; he actually did owe me the money for that robot kitchen—and for his killer. I'd let things slide because he'd been late before, but I decided to use it as an excuse to get into his office. I wanted you with me because I wanted to catch him red-handed with the robot in his wall niche."

"You knew about the wall niche?"

Ross shook his head. "Nope. But I knew it had to be in his office somewhere. I figured that if you were with me, we could nab him with the goods, see?"

"Yeah—but why didn't you just tell me?"

"What proof did I have? Besides, you would've wanted to do it all legally, with a search warrant and everything. All he needed was two minutes warn-

ing, and he'd have had the robot going elsewhere—a long ways away."

Hurst finished his beer and signaled for another. "That makes sense. I—*hey!*" He looked sharply at Ross. "If all he needed was a minute or so, how come you figured you could get in? All he had to do was have the secretary delay you long enough to get rid of his killer robot." His eyes narrowed. "I thought it was damned funny about that secretary going dead."

Ross Underhill sighed. "Yeah. I was carrying a gamma projector in my pocket. You'll find it stuffed down in the couch in Thursday's outer office."

"The captain's probably already found it, I—"

Something buzzed very softly. Sergeant Hurst glanced at Ross and then lifted his wrist to his lips. "Sergeant Hurst," he said into the wrist microphone, anticipating the caller.

A voice spoke into the speaker in his ear.

"Yes, sir," said Hurst. "He's with me now; I'll bring him in." A pause, then: "Yes, sir, I will. Right away."

He dropped his hand and said to Ross: "Finish your drink. The captain wants to see you at headquarters."

Three days later, Ross Underhill sat morosely in his cell, staring at the floor. Across from him sat Martin Blaine, his lawyer.

"It looks bad, Underhill," Blaine said.

"I know," Ross Underhill said, without looking up. "How much longer?"

"The preliminary hearing is in ten minutes." Blaine was a thin, balding man with a nervous manner. "I think we'll be able to confuse the prosecutor a little. There's no motive yet, as far as I can see."

"What about the killer robot I told Hurst about?"

"They can't use Hurst's testimony; that's hearsay. And they can't force you to testify. They still haven't found the robot."

A police officer came up to the door of the cell and activated the electrolock. "All right, let's go. Judge Hogbotham wants you up there early."

Fifteen minutes later, Judge Hogbotham was saying: "The purpose of this preliminary examination is to determine whether anyone should be bound over to stand trial in Circuit Court. The prosecutor will begin."

The prosecutor was a sleepy-looking individual with a slight paunch and a baritone voice. He looked over the accused, Ross Underhill, then looked at the judge.

"If the Court please, it is the contention of the prosecution that the deceased, Quentin Thursday, was murdered for gain. We will attempt to show that the defendant, Ross Underhill, had both motive and opportunity."

READY, AIM, ROBOT!

"Very well; proceed."

"Call Police Sergeant Jamieson Hurst."

Hurst was sworn in. He told his story—exactly what had happened on the afternoon of the killing.

"Did you search the accused immediately after the discovery of the body, Sergeant?" asked the prosecutor.

"No, sir," said Hurst.

"Why not?"

"At the time, I saw no reason to. I had no reason to think he had done it."

The prosecutor looked angry and addressed the Court. "I'd like to remind the Court that this is a conclusion of the witness and should not be admitted as testimony."

Blaine stood up. "I'd like to remind the Court," he said in his reedy voice, "that this is the prosecution's witness."

"The answer will remain," said Judge Hogbotham. "Proceed."

"Have you any reason to believe that the defendant may have been armed?" the prosecutor asked.

"Yes, sir," said Hurst.

"Explain, please."

"A gamma projector was found in the sofa near the spot where Underhill was sitting. His fingerprints were on it."

The prosecutor nodded. "This was after the body had been discovered?"

"Yes, sir."

"Is it possible that he might

have had more than one weapon on him?"

"Objection!" said Blaine. "A gamma projector is a tool, not a lethal weapon. Only prolonged exposure to its effects can kill a man."

"Sustained," said the Court. "Rephrase the question."

"Is it possible," asked the prosecutor, "that the defendant may have been carrying something besides the gamma projector?"

"Objection." It was Blaine again. "It has not been proved that the defendant was carrying the projector."

"His fingerprints were on it," snapped the prosecutor.

"That hasn't been proved, either. Witness has so stated, but witness has not qualified as a fingerprint expert."

The prosecutor turned to the bench. "Your Honor, my next witness will be a police laboratory technician who will state that the fingerprints are most definitely that of the defendant. If the Court wishes, I will have Sergeant Hurst step down for a few moments and ask the technician to testify."

"Your Honor," said Blaine smoothly, "that won't be necessary. We stipulate that the fingerprints were those of the defendant. We further stipulate that the projector was in possession of the defendant and was placed in the sofa at the time suggested by the witness."

The prosecutor looked flabbergasted.

"Why did you object, then?" the judge asked.

"Your Honor, I must insist that the prosecutor lay a proper foundation before he asks certain questions."

"Prosecution is so instructed," said the judge. "Proceed."

"Thank you, your Honor," said the prosecutor. He turned back towards Hurst. "Sergeant, was anything else found in the room which had any bearing on the case?"

"Yes, sir. A Nordling-Fenshaw coagulator."

"And where was it found?"

"In the same sofa, sir."

Ross Underhill tried not to show the shock he felt. Someone had put a coagulator in that sofa! Oh, brother! That cooked it!

The prosecutor looked triumphantly at Blaine. "Will the defense stipulate to the coagulator, too?"

"Certainly not," snapped Blaine.

"Very well. Cross examine."

Blaine got up and walked over to the witness chair. "Sergeant Hurst, were there any fingerprints found on the coagulator?"

"No, sir, there were not."

"Can you give any reason for there being fingerprints on the gamma projector and not on the coagulator?"

"The coagulator had been wiped off, sir, but the projector hadn't."

"I see. Now, you were sitting

next to the defendant during the time in question?"

"Not all the time. Most of it." Hurst went on to explain what he had done.

"Doesn't it seem odd to you that the defendant would have wiped off one of the objects and not the other?"

"Objection!" said the prosecutor. "That calls for a conclusion of the witness."

"Sustained," said Judge Hogbotham.

Ross Underhill pondered the evidence. What had happened? How could he have walked into a trap like that?

The next witness was a technician who testified as to the effective range and the action on the human body of a coagulator. It was established that it was impossible to pin down a coagulator death within a period of time less than six hours because of the effect on the human body. Rigor mortis set in immediately, and the temperature of the body dropped as the body's own energy was used to denature the protein in the tissues.

"In other words," said the prosecutor, "it is possible that the killing took place only seconds before Sergeant Hurst and the defendant entered the room?"

"That's right; yes, sir."

Ross could see where the testimony was heading. The police were going to contend that he had shot Thursday through the door of the office just before he had gone in with Hurst! And

then he had concealed the weapon in the sofa.

Witness number three was the technician who had been in Thursday's office with the police, the one who had taken the robot secretary apart. After qualifying him as an expert witness, the prosecutor said: "Now, would you please tell the Court your conclusions as to what caused the death of the robot?"

"Not 'death,'" the technician said importantly. "Since the neurotronic brain of a robot is technically not alive to begin with. We speak of the 'total randomization of impulses' in the brain."

"I understand, sir, but isn't this 'total randomizing' in the neurotronic brain of a robot commonly called 'death'?"

"Oh, yes—by the layman."

Judge Hogbotham leaned forward. "The witness will remember that most of the people in this courtroom are laymen as far as his expert testimony is concerned. I would prefer that the witness refrain from using technical jargon as much as possible. It will, of course, be permitted if it is necessary to draw fine technical differences; the Court has no wish to hamper the testimony of the witness unduly."

"Uh—thank you, your Honor."

"Proceed."

The prosecutor repeated the question.

"The cause of—uh—'death',"

said the technician, "was the application of high-intensity gamma radiation to the brain itself. This causes the impulses within the brain to become completely random, so that the brain can no longer function logically or rationally."

"Could such randomization have been caused by the gamma projector in the Exhibit Box?"

"It could."

"Your witness," said the prosecutor.

Martin Blaine rose and smiled in a friendly manner. "I wonder," he said, "if there might be anything else which could have caused the death of the robot. Was there any damage done to it? Physical damage that could *not* have been caused by a gamma projector?"

"You mean the scratch?"

"If there was such a scratch, yes. Could a scratch cause the total randomization of a neurotronic brain?"

"It could, but it didn't in this case."

Blaine looked a little surprised. "Oh?"

"Just a minute," interposed the judge. "Witness has mentioned a scratch. Nothing has been said about this scratch before. Before we go any further, I'd like to have a description of this scratch."

The technician nodded. "Yes, your Honor. The scratch was noticed . . ."

He went on to describe the scratch and its location.

"What could have caused it?" the judge asked.

"A grain of abrasive dust in the cooling lubricant solution is usually responsible for such things, your Honor."

"And it could have caused the death of the robot in question?"

"It could have, but it didn't. You see, when the gamma gun was found, I was asked to do a more detailed analysis of the randomized brain. The scratch did not go through the B-K layer, the outermost section of the brain. A scratch would have to go through the F-2 layer to cause complete randomization. It did not go that far."

"I see," said the judge. "Go ahead, Counsellor."

"What could the scratch have done?" Blaine asked.

"That's hard to say. I'd have to know the reactions of the non-randomized brain. It's hard to tell from a 'dead' brain. The scratch is in the memory area, but that's all I could tell you."

"And it definitely could not have caused the randomization of the brain?"

"Definitely not."

Blaine nodded. "Thank you. That's all." He went back and sat down beside Underhill while the prosecutor called his next witness.

"How does it look?" Ross Underhill whispered.

"Just hold on. We're doing all right."

"The hell we are! They've practically proved method and opportunity."



"Just hold on," the lawyer repeated.

The next three witnesses were called in, one after the other, to establish the time of Quentin Thursday's death—which could not be done by medical evidence. Ross Underhill perked up his ears and listened carefully as Mr. Philip Graydon was called to the stand. Graydon had been number one on the little list that Thursday had had in his desk.

The prosecutor had Graydon establish that he was a control circuit repairman, and that he had had an appointment with Thursday at 1400 hours on the fatal afternoon.

"Now, Mr. Graydon, at what time did you arrive at the office of the deceased?"

"At approximately 1403 or 1404. I was a little late." Graydon was a short, thin, nervous, balding man with a pencil-thin mustache, a skirmish line of hairs on his upper lip.

"And what was the nature of your business?"

"I have been doing a certain amount of circuit work for Mr. Thursday—control and sensory circuits, that sort of thing. I went up to discuss the details of one of his new line of kitchen robots."

"This, then, was a purely business call?"

"It was. Certain sensory circuits weren't functioning properly. Mr. Thursday didn't like their reactions."

The prosecutor nodded. "And

he wanted you to make some changes in the brain circuits?"

Graydon shook his head. "Not the brain. I'm not a neurotronic brain specialist; I simply work with the circuits that make the machine move. The nerves and muscles, so to speak, not the brain."

"I understand. Now, I ask you: Was Mr. Quentin Thursday alive when you came to his office?"

"Yes, sir. Very much so, sir," said Graydon.

"Was he alive when you left him?"

"Yes, sir," Graydon said positively, "he was."

"About what time was that?"

"I should say around 1445."

"How can you place the time so accurately?"

"I had to catch a subway to Boston. It left at 1500, and it's about a twelve minute walk from Thursday's office to the station. I caught the train easily, so it couldn't have been much later than, say, 1447 when I left. On the other hand, I didn't have to wait long for the train, either. A minute, maybe."

"I see. Was there anyone else in Mr. Thursday's office while you were there?"

Graydon said: "Not in the inner office, no. But there was a man waiting in the outer office when I left."

"Did you recognize him?"

"Yes. It was James Meinster."

"Are you personally acquainted with Mr. Meinster?"

"I know him by sight, and

I've spoken to him once or twice. I've seen him around Mr. Thursday's office several times."

"And he was waiting in the outer office, you say?"

"That's right."

"At approximately 1445?"

"That's right."

The prosecutor turned to Blaine. "Your witness."

Blaine rose to his feet. "If the Court please, I should like to call Mr. Graydon back later for cross-examination. Right now, I would like to hear the rest of the prosecution's testimony."

"Granted," said the judge. "Go on, Mr. Prosecutor."

"I call Mr. James Meinster to the stand."

Meinster was in his late forties, heavy set, graying, and very distinguished looking. He was sworn in, and identified himself as a professional investor.

"I put money into businesses that no one else will back," he explained. "I usually have an eye for a good investment that looks risky to a bank."

"I see." The prosecutor put his hands behind his back. "Mr. Meinster, when was the last time you saw Mr. Quentin Thursday?"

Meinster identified the time.

"You were in his office," the prosecutor said. "At what time was that?"

"Well, the appointment was for 1450, but I was a few minutes early."

"Was there anyone else in the outer office with you?"

"In the outer office? No, not at first. I walked in and spoke to the secretary robot—told it I was waiting to see Thursday. At about 1445, a man came out. Walked on by me, as though he was in a hurry. I waited five more minutes, or so, and then the secretary told me to go in."

"This man who walked out—was he known to you?"

"Slightly. It was a man named Graydon. Met him once or twice."

"I see. Now, you went in to Mr. Thursday's office. Was Mr. Thursday alive at that time?"

"He was. And he was alive when I left."

"We'll get to that in a moment, Mr. Meinster," said the prosecutor. "Now, can you tell us what your business with Mr. Thursday was?"

"He had asked me to back a new line of kitchen robots he wanted to put out. I was there to discuss the details."

Ross Underhill tried to keep his face calm; his lawyer had told him not to display too much anxiety. But Ross kept wanting to chew his fingernails or tear his hair or anything else to relieve the tension that was building up within him.

The trial seemed to drag on and on. No, not *trial*; he had to remember that. This was just a preliminary examination, to show cause why he should be held for trial. No matter what was found out here, the trial it-

self would be the big battle, unless the judge decided not to bind him over.

The next witness was Augustus Manetti, who identified himself as a free-lance robot design engineer.

"Did you have an appointment with Mr. Quentin Thursday on the day in question?"

"I did."

"At what time?"

Manetti, a big, hulking blond-haired man, folded his arms over his chest. "The appointment was for 1500. I was there on the dot."

Manetti went on to explain that he had only recently begun to work for Thursday on robot design. Ross Underhill thought sourly to himself: *Yeah; Thursday hired Manetti after he'd thrown me out.*

"You showed up for the appointment on time," the prosecutor paraphrased. "And was Mr. Thursday alive at that time?"

"I don't know; I didn't get to see him."

"How did this happen?"

"I went to the secretary—the robot—and gave it my name. It said that I had no appointment for that time. I tried to get it to call Mr. Thursday to verify the appointment, but it said that Mr. Thursday had given it orders that he was not to be disturbed."

It was at that moment that the answer flashed into Ross Underhill's mind. Suddenly, as if he had had the picture drawn for him, he knew what had happened that fatal afternoon.

READY, AIM, ROBOT!

He leaned over and began whispering furiously into Martin Blaine's ear. As he talked, Blaine's eyes grew wider.

At last he whispered back to Underhill. "All right. But I'll have to stall. I'll try it."

When the witness was turned over to Blaine, he stood up and began cross-examining, boring into every bit of Manetti's testimony. Underhill listened, but nothing more came out that would be of any interest to him. He kept his eyes on the clock as the hand moved slowly toward time for the noon recess.

At last, the judge said: "Could this cross-examination be interrupted for lunch, Counsellor?"

"Certainly, your Honor."

"There will be a recess of one hour. This Court will reconvene at 1300 hours. All witnesses are instructed that they will appear at that time."

In the cell of the Felony Jail, Ross Underhill stood by his bunk while the guard let his lawyer and Sergeant Hurst in through the grilled door.

"It's unusual to allow a member of the police department to set in on a conference like this," said Martin Blaine, "but there's reason for it."

Sergeant Hurst nodded. "If Ross is innocent, I'll do everything I can to get him off."

"Thanks, Jamie," Ross said. "Just to give you something to think about, do you remember exactly what happened when we went into Thursday's office? Aft-

er I killed the secretary, I mean."

"Why—sure. We went in and found him dead. Quentin Thursday was—"

"Who went into the room first?"

Hurst frowned. "Why, I did. I was on your left, so I was naturally closer to the door."

"Then how did I beam down Thursday, shooting through the door, without hitting you? Tell me that."

Hurst blinked. "I guess you could have done it, but I'm damned if I see how. It wouldn't be easy."

"It sure wouldn't. I'd have to aim past you so that the vibrations wouldn't hit you. That would mean I'd have to take the gun out of my pocket."

Hurst considered that. "Not necessarily; I don't think my testimony on that would stand up in court."

"I'm not trying to convince the Court, Jamie; I'm trying to convince you. What do you think?"

"I believe you," Hurst said. "Now, how do we get you off?"

"Okay, listen. If I didn't do it, it must have been one of the other three who were there this afternoon, right?"

"Probably. Although there could be a fifth person that we haven't found yet."

Ross shook his head. "If we start off on something like that we'll never get anywhere. Let's just stick to the suspects we have." He felt in his pockets,

found them empty, and then accepted a cigarette from Hurst.

"The whole thing hinges on that little scratch on the robot's brain. When was it put there, and how, and by whom?"

"Go ahead, Ross," the sergeant said. "I'm listening."

Ross went ahead.

"The Court will come to order," said Judge Hogbotham. "The defense will continue with cross-examination."

Martin Blaine rose. "If the Court please, I would like to dismiss Mr. Manetti for the moment and recall Mr. Meinster to the stand."

"Very well. Call Mr. Meinster."

As Meinster went to the witness box, there was a slight commotion in the rear of the courtroom. Sergeant Hurst came in, wheeling a stand on which sat an object covered by a sheet of canvas.

"What is this?" asked the judge in some surprise.

"Merely an exhibit for the defense, your Honor. I will ask that it be admitted in evidence later."

"Proceed."

"Thank you." Blaine turned to the witness. "I think you stated, Mr. Meinster, that you arrived at Quentin Thursday's office at about 1445 and left at about 1510?"

"That's right."

"When you left, Mr. Meinster, did you take anything with you?"

Meinster paled a little. "What do you mean?"

"I mean, did you carry any object from that office which you had not had in your possession previously?"

Meinster hesitated for a moment, then: "No, I did not."

"Let the record show that witness hesitated," said Blaine. Then he walked over to the canvas-covered object on the stand and whipped off the cloth. "I ask you, Mr. Meinster, if you have ever seen this before."

It was a small, metallic oblate spheroid about the size of a regulation football. At one end was a lensed opening; at the other end were several tubes, and there were other tubes projecting from the sides.

Meinster paled even more. "Yes," he said finally, "I've seen it."

"When?"

"Uh — in — uh — in Quentin Thursday's office."

"Was that the last time you saw it?"

Suddenly, Meinster clamped his lips shut tightly. "I refuse to answer that question on the grounds that it would tend to incriminate me."

"Oh?" Blaine leaned forward. "Now, surely, Mr. Meinster, it is better to be indicted for robbery than for murder, isn't it?"

Meinster said nothing.

Blaine turned to the judge. "If your Honor will permit, I would like to demonstrate this object. I'd like to show how it works."

The judge looked somewhat

baffled, but he nodded his okay. "You may proceed."

Blaine went over to the control board. "This is a robot which has been preset to search for a certain man and then take his picture. Right now, it has in its memory several men. If it sees any of them, its mechanism will operate."

"Is it perfectly harmless?" asked the judge.

Blaine turned to Ross Underhill. "It is, isn't it, Ross?"

Underhill stood up. "I built it myself. It contains nothing but a camera, a brain, and sensory and control apparatus. It is as harmless as a cleaning robot." Then he smiled. "Unless someone has planted something in it since I saw it last, it's perfectly harmless."

"Proceed," said the judge.

Blaine pressed a button on the control panel. The little mechanism coughed a couple of times, then rose silently into the air. Then it hovered and began to turn slowly, as though it were looking over the men in the courtroom—which, in a manner of speaking, it was.

It turned and stared at Meinster. Meinster looked at it apprehensively, but said nothing.

"Mr. Meinster," Blaine said suddenly, "isn't it true that you jimmied open the electrolock on Thursday's door?"

"I refuse to answer," said Meinster, without taking his eyes off the floating robot.

The robot's muffled jets hissed

a little, and it swiveled around and stared directly at Philip Graydon, the repair technician.

Graydon screamed.

In the judge's chambers, half an hour later, Judge Hogbotham said: "I still do not completely understand, Mr. Underhill."

"It's fairly simple, your Honor. It was that scratch on the brain that bothered me, you see. It was much too precise to have been done by accident. It erased part of the memory, but not all of it. It *could* have been an accident, but I assumed that it wasn't and went on from there.

"When was it put there? It had to be before I got there.

"Who put it there? An expert, obviously. No layman could have been that precise. No layman could have incised out the exact spot where the memory of that afternoon's appointments was without either taking all the memory or burning out the brain.

"Since I knew it wasn't I who had done it, it must have been one of the other three. From the first, I thought it had to be either Graydon or Manetti, since Meinster isn't a robot man. Then, when Meinster said that the robot had let him in, I decided that it must be Manetti."

Martin Blaine chuckled. "Then Manetti fouled you up by testifying that the robot wouldn't let him in."

"It only fouled me up for a minute, really. Then I knew that it had to be either Graydon or

Meinster. Meinster just might have known more about robots than he let on.

"What happened was this: Philip Graydon kept his appointment with Thursday at the time he said he did. He had evidently been working with Thursday on the killer robot; he was the man who had put the coagulator in it instead of the camera that I had put in. But Thursday wanted to get rid of Graydon, just as he had tried to kill me.

"Graydon decided to get Thursday first, so he killed him with the coagulator. Then he went out to the outer office and made that little scratch on the secretary's brain at just the right place to remove the appointment list, not knowing that Thursday had a written list.

"Then he heard someone at the door of the outer office—Meinster. He shoved the coagulator into the sofa cushions and pretended to be coming out of Thursday's office. The idea he had was to deny that he had been able to get in to see Thursday. But when he found out that the whole brain had been burned out, he changed his story."

"If he'd stuck to it," said Sergeant Hurst, "you would really have been in trouble because you were the only one who had been in there previously."

"Yeah," Ross agreed. "Anyway, Meinster came in. The secretary told him that he was not on the appointment list, since that had been scratched from its memory. Meinster didn't like

that at all. He stormed over to the door and jimmied the electrolock—it's easy to do. Then he got a shock when he found Thursday dead.

"I think you'll find that he had an interest in the killer robot, too, only he didn't know it was supposed to be a killer. He had money in it as a spy device. He knew that he couldn't get any of his money back with Thursday dead, so he decided to take the robot and have it duplicated later, claiming it as his own. But he didn't know it had a coagulator in the nose instead of a camera."

"I take it," said the judge, "that the device you demonstrated in the courtroom was not the one that Meinster stole. You couldn't have risked that."

"That's right, sir. It was one of my own that I had in my apartment; Sergeant Hurst got it for me. It isn't even a robot; just the operating shell without a brain. But Meinster thought

it was the same one that he had taken—and so did Graydon.

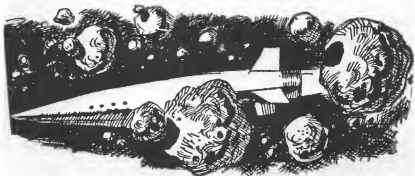
"Meinster wasn't worried when it pointed at him. He thought it was just a camera device, anyway. But Graydon knew that the robot in Thursday's office had a coagulator in it, and he knew that Thursday had given the robot his recognition pattern. So he panicked."

The judge rubbed his chin. "If he hadn't confessed in the courtroom, you might still be in trouble. But that was good detective work, young man."

Sergeant Hurst's snort was good-naturedly derisive. "Detective work, my foot! He was going by guesswork, pure and simple. He just assumed he knew the answer and went on from there. There was no chain of evidence leading positively to Philip Graydon."

Underhill grinned broadly. "Sure. But, what the hell, Jamie, that's all Sherlock Holmes ever did."

**THE END**



# THE TRAVELING COUCH

By HENRY SLESAR

ILLUSTRATOR SUMMERS

OF COURSE, the doorbell had to ring. The day had been a series of exasperating interruptions, and Ellen had developed a grim tolerance for each succeeding one. But now, with a naked Jonathon squawling and kicking in his crib, with a roast going black and inedible in the oven, with a clock moving too fast towards her husband's homecoming hour, she heard the doorbell's jangle and bellowed her indignation to the world. The world didn't hear her, but Jonathon did. He set up a lusty sympathetic caterwauling that made her smack his tiny rump in anger.

"Shut up! Shut up, do you hear me!"

She whipped a sheet over him and stalked out of the nursery, not caring about the fact that he promptly kicked it off. When

she flung open the front door and saw the dignified stranger standing pigeon-toed on her welcome mat, she glared inhospitably and said: "Yes?"

"Mrs. Angstrom?" He took off his hat, exposing a bare scalp to the cold. "My name is Dr. Pepys; may I come in and speak to you?"

She would have said no, but the title stopped her. He looked the part, too, with his grave, hollow-cheeked face and small white moustache. She wiped her hands on her apron and stood aside when he entered, noting curiously that he wore no overcoat despite the midwinter chill. He didn't appear affected; the air he brought inside felt toasted.

"I hope you'll forgive this intrusion," he said, without break-

*Some psychoanalysts say we can find the root causes of our neuroses in our childhood. But how far back does childhood go?*



ing his stride towards the living room's most comfortable chair. "But I've come rather a long way to see you. Do you mind if I sit down?"

"No, of course, not." She stopped staring, and then connected his title with an image of accident and sudden illness. "It's not about my husband, is it?"

"No, no," the man said, smiling reassuringly. "Nothing like that, Mrs. Angstrom. As a matter of fact, my visit concerns your son."

"Jonathon?"

"If you'd sit down—" He waved her towards a chair, and she sat down as if the wave had been a command, suddenly conscious of her cheap print dress and the unkempt condition of her hair. "Thank you," he said soberly. "I think this is the best way to hear what I have to say; sitting down."

"What do you mean?"

"I said that my visit concerns your son, Mrs. Angstrom, and it does. You see—" His eyes changed focus strangely. "Your son is a patient of mine, and that's why I'm here."

"Dr. Kaiser is Jonathon's pediatrician. Are you connected with him?"

"I'm not a pediatrician, Mrs. Angstrom. I'm a psychoanalyst. More importantly, I should explain that the son you have now is not my patient. The man I'm trying to help at the moment is thirty-six years old, and has been under my care for the past six months."

He looked so rational and intelligent that Ellen didn't entertain the notion for more than a second. But in that second, she wondered if a madman hadn't wandered to her doorstep.

"I'm sorry," he said, flushing slightly. "I'm not explaining this well. The fact is, I'm in the process of helping your son through a severe emotional crisis. He's thirty-six in the world I've just left, but is suffering from traumatic injuries inflicted long before. His condition is serious, and I'm sure you'll want to help me all you can."

She was shaking her head from side to side. "You must have made a mistake, Doctor. My son is only three months old—"

"Perhaps I should be more explicit. In exactly twenty-seven years from now, Mrs. Angstrom, two atomic physicists, named Lu Cheng and Robert Godowsky, will make a startling discovery in the course of their work with Atomic Relativity: the discovery that time travel is possible not merely for electrons, but for larger material objects, including human beings. Three years later, they will have completed the first practical time machine with the ability to move matter both backwards and forwards in the time slot, with the only boundary being the future. The machine will be the most carefully guarded and regulated instrument ever constructed by man, and will be available for use only by authorized persons engaged in legitimate researches,

who will be bound by the strictest sort of regulations during their journeys to the past. This group has already included historians, whose purpose, of course, is not to change in any way the histories they record, but verify them. And most recently, it has included certain members of the medical profession, most especially, psychoanalysts. I'm sure you can see why."

Her head continued to move from side to side.

"Surely, you understand the techniques of analysis, Mrs. Angstrom; they were common knowledge even at this time. The source of all neuroses lies in the past of the patient, often deep-rooted in his infancy. It was a Dr. Hugo Breckman of Berlin who first suggested the possibility of an analyst time-traveling to the past of his patient, in order to better understand the framework of his problem. Several such visits have been made already; it's too early to be certain of their success or failure, but the indications are that it is possible to expedite cures by such means. And that, Mrs. Angstrom, is what brings me here today."

"From—from the future?"

"Yes," the analyst said gravely. "A future in which your son, Jonathon, is a very sick young man."

Ellen's son, Jonathon, still age three months, let the present know that he was a very uncomfortable young man. His wail of

protest penetrated the walls between him and his mother, and Ellen flew out of her chair in the direction of the nursery. She didn't even know that Dr. Pepys was trailing softly behind her as she picked him up out of his crib.

"Shut up! Shut up!" she screamed, as Jonathon's cries approached hysteria. She bore his naked body towards the bassinet and began the diapering process, a knack that had never become one of her skills.

"Has he been like this all the time?" Pepys asked. "Without clothes on?"

She looked at the doctor savagely, the safety pin in her mouth preventing the angry answer for a moment. Then she yanked it out and said: "What do you expect? Every time I start to *do* something, the doorbell rings. Or the telephone. Or the damn stove starts acting up." She stomped her foot as Jonathon made another diaper change imperative. "Oh, *Lord!*" she said, close to tears. "You picked a fine day to climb into that machine of yours—"

"You mean, things aren't always like this?"

"Of course, they're always like this!" She whirled on him. "So I suppose you're going to tell him that it was his mother, his poor, inefficient mother that gave him the whimshams when he was a baby. And that's why he's so mixed up, right?"

"I'm not sure of anything," Pepys said quietly. "There are

so many influences in a child's life—"

"Influences! I'll give you an influence. Just wait until my husband gets home. You'll see Mr. Influence himself. The first thing he'll do is have so many of his damn martinis that he'll fall asleep in front of the TV before nine o'clock. And if he says ten words to me all night I'll knit them on a sampler and hang them up in the hallway—"

"Jonathon seems to have liked his father," the doctor said hesitantly.

"I'm sure he will! I'm sure they'll grow up to be great drinking companions. And he'll probably be a hundred-dollar-a-week chemist like him, too—" She looked sharply at her visitor, conscious of a unique opportunity. "Or is he?" Ellen said. "What *does* Jonathon do?"

"I'm afraid I can't tell you that, Mrs. Angstrom. I can't tell you anything about what will happen; it's one of our strictest regulations."

By now, the infant had been pacified with a cold bottle of milk. Ellen sighed, struggled with his night clothes, and got him into the crib. As they left the nursery, the analyst said: "I gather you're not on the best of terms with your husband, Mrs. Angstrom."

"Best of terms! That's putting it nicely." She sat down and lit a cigarette. "My husband and I have an understanding, Doctor. He does what he wants, and I do what he wants. I hate to think

what would happen if I'd produced a *girl* instead of *that*." She hiked her thumb towards the silent nursery. "He practically *ordered* me to have a boy."

"Really?" Pepys murmured.

"Yes, really. My husband does not like girls, Dr. Pepys. Not until they're over eighteen. *Then* he likes them."

"You suspect him of—not being faithful?"

"I don't have to suspect, Doctor. He isn't even courteous enough to be sly."

The doctor was looking at his watch.

"Almost six-thirty," he said. "I'm afraid I'll have to end my visit now, Mrs. Angstrom. You have been very helpful, and I thank you. But before I go, I wonder if you would be kind enough to examine this." He reached into his pocket and produced a small, faintly luminiscent globe. There was motion in its interior, and Ellen took it, her eyes curious.

"What is it?" she said, her eyes fixed to the odd, meaningless movements of the tiny roving lights inside the transparent ball.

"Please keep watching it. I'm afraid this is a necessary adjunct to my research. If you keep observing the object, you'll detect a certain compelling, hypnotic fascination. Within a minute or so, you will find yourself entering a deep trance state. No harm will come to you; this is purely a precautionary measure."

"But, why?" Ellen said, unable to lift her eyes from the globe.

"It's nothing you need worry about. When you enter the final trance stage, I will ask you to forget about my visit to you today, so that you will not be tempted to talk about it to others, or concern yourself needlessly about it. That's really all there is to it, Mrs. Angstrom. Mrs. Angstrom?"

She didn't answer. The man from the future took the ball from her hands and replaced it in his pocket with a sigh. Then he spoke to her, softly, telling her what she must do.

Ellen Angstrom arrived home at four, feeling a certain amount of quiet satisfaction in the results of her visit to the attorney's office. Her husband had been surprisingly amenable about the separation agreement; as a matter of fact, his own lawyer had seemed chagrined at his placid acceptance of her stiff terms. Not that the percentage arrangement really mattered; her husband was never much of a money-maker.

She stopped at the floor below her apartment, and was about to ring Mrs. Whittaker's doorbell. She could hear Jonny's piping five-year-old's voice inside, and Mrs. Whittaker, the obliging old lady who took on the baby-sitting chores without fee, replied laughingly. Well, he's happy, Ellen thought with a shrug. Might as well enjoy an after-

noon's peace. She took the elevator to her own floor, went into the apartment, and mixed herself a drink.

When the chimes sounded half an hour later, she was pleasantly muzzy and agreeable. She smiled at the distinguished moustached man in the doorway, and there was a flirtatious lilt in her voice when she said: "Yes?"

"Mrs. Angstrom? My name is Dr. Pepys. I wonder if I could speak to you a moment?"

"Sure, come on in," Ellen said, patting the freshly-permanented curls on the back of her head. "I was just having a little . . ." She stopped, and watched him curiously as he found his way to a chair. "Don't I know you from somewhere?"

"I don't believe so, Mrs. Angstrom. But I *am* acquainted with your son, Jonny."

"Oh." Her voice went flat. "Then you must be from the school. Well, you needn't worry about him any more, Doctor. Things are going to be quite different now."

"I'm afraid I don't know what you mean."

"I know he's been a perfect little monster, but you'll have to understand. My—my husband and I have been having some difficulties, but they're all straightened out now. As a matter of fact, I've been thinking of taking Jonny out of school and putting him somewhere—private. Someplace where they understand problem kids. I think that would be best for him."

"Yes," Dr. Pepys said, touching the end of his neat moustache. "I've heard that there are such schools. But just what do you think your son's problem is, Mrs. Angstrom?"

She laughed sharply. "I can tell you that in one word, Doctor. Spoiled. It's a disease he caught from his father, but we have got it isolated now. Now he'll go somewhere where they won't jump every time he opens his mouth."

"I see. And this will be some sort of—boarding school? Away from home?"

"Yes. I need a vacation from him even more than he needs one from me. Best thing in the world for both of us."

"And what about your husband?"

"Him? He's too busy trying to make something out of his chemical firm. Going to make a million dollars out of miracle drugs, it says here. I don't think he cares much about where Jonny is." She hiccupped, and frowned at her glass. "Just what was it you wanted to see me about, Dr.—"

"Pepys," the man said. "It was nothing really important, Mrs. Angstrom. I merely wanted to find out how Jonny was doing. He always seemed to be such a bright, intelligent boy—"

"Smart," Ellen muttered, realizing that the pleasant glow had gone and that drunkenness was setting in. "Too damn smart, if you ask me."

"Yes," the man said, reaching

into his pocket. "I wonder if you would do me a favor, Mrs. Angstrom?"

"What's that?"

"Would you mind looking at this for a moment?" He handed her a strangely luminescent globe, with odd moving lights in its interior.

In the back seat of the large black automobile, at last free of the obligation to look solemn and unhappy, Ellen Angstrom relaxed, pushed aside the heavy veil, and lit a cigarette. She was glad that Jon had refused to ride in the same car with her, even if this public display of disrespect had its embarrassing side. What was even worse, he had driven to his father's funeral in his own car, the insolent flame-red sports car that roared and growled like an underfed jungle beast. It was somewhere far ahead of the procession by now, snarling at the road in the same way that Jon snarled at the world. Sometimes, Ellen wished that they had remained in the same, uneasy state of middle-class poverty in which Jonathon had been born; her late husband's surprising success in the chemical field had had its advantages for her, but for her son, it had added the problem of too much money to the problem of too little love. The combination was disastrous, as far as Ellen was concerned. Only she wasn't too concerned. Not really. She was thinking about Egg.

Egmont O'Hara, that deliciously obvious fortune-hunter,

was waiting for her in his apartment now, planning, she was sure, his pat little speech of commiseration. She was going to enjoy hearing it. Even more, she was going to enjoy acting the role of the bereaved widow, and letting Egg comfort her as only Egg could . . .

Something had happened to the traffic. Red lights were flashing, and there were vehicles at odd slants in all parts of the road. She leaned forward impatiently, and rapped on the glass; the chauffeur lowered the partition between them and said: "Seems to be some kind of accident up ahead, Mrs. Angstrom. Want me to find out?"

She made an exasperated gesture and climbed out of the car herself. It didn't take her long to know that the accident had involved her son; there was no missing the violent color of his automobile. It was leaning crazily against a telephone pole, its ugly snoutlike hood corrugated by the impact of the collision, its right fender like a crumpled piece of red tissue. She felt no sting of anxiety at the sight, for Jon, in his dirty gray sweater and even dirtier corduroy pants, was standing beside the wreck with a cigarette in his mouth, swearing through the smoke. She didn't go to him; instead, she climbed back into the Cadillac and beckoned the driver to go on.

But she was more shaken than she thought. As they came off the highway into the city, she tapped on the glass once more

and told the chauffeur to take her to her own apartment. She would need some time alone, Ellen thought; she wouldn't go to Egg in her widow's blacks, even if the idea had at first seemed mischievously appealing. She'd change first.

There was a stranger in the elevator as she ascended to the penthouse, a handsome, grave-faced man with a carefully trimmed moustache. She glanced at him sidelong as they rode up together, and he responded by removing his hat. She knew he would speak to her as they emerged on the same floor, but she was surprised to learn that he knew her name.

"Mrs. Angstrom? My name is Dr. Pepys. I know this is a poor time to bother you—" He looked pointedly at her attire. "But I would appreciate it if we could talk a moment."

"Do I know you?" Ellen said, squinting at him.

"No, I'm afraid I never had that pleasure. However, I do know your son, and it's Jon I'd like to talk about."

She frowned. "I'm sorry, Dr. Pepys. But I've a very important—I mean, I'm just not in the mood to see anyone right now. I've just come from my husband's funeral."

"Yes, I know," he said, apologetically. "And I understand that your son was involved in some sort of accident—"

"Well, if *that's* what you're worried about, you can forget it. Jon's banged up three cars al-

ready, and he walks away from every smash-up."

"It's really not that, Mrs. Angstrom. Although in a way, I suppose it is—"

"Some other time, Doctor." She put the key into the lock of her door.

"These frequent accidents of his, Mrs. Angstrom. Did it ever occur to you that they're not mere accidents?"

"Not now, Doctor. Please."

"Surely, you can see the compulsive nature of—"

The telephone was ringing inside the apartment, and Ellen's heart thudded with the knowledge that Egg was on the other end.

"Some other *time!*" she shouted, and shoved the door open, then shut it before the stranger could prevent it. He stood outside her apartment door, his face crimsoned in frustration. Then he turned and went to the elevator, jiggling a small, luminescent globe in his hand.

Looking in the full-length, three-view mirror on the fifth floor of the Sculptured Woman, Ellen Angstrom felt more like crying than buying. In the window, the green sheath dress had seemed made for her complexion and her outlook; but there was no question now that it hadn't been made for her figure. She looked at herself, and made silent, solemn vows about diet.

"It's lovely," the sloe-eyed snip behind her crooned. "Just lovely on you, Mrs. Angstrom. I don't



think we'll have to do a thing to it, do you?"

"No," Ellen said hoarsely. "No, I think it's fine the way it is."

"Then I'll have it sent to you right away," the salesgirl said, with a smile a little too cunning.

Ten minutes later, Ellen hurried out of the store and into the cool autumn air of Fifth Avenue, glad to get away from the incriminating three-sided mirror, even happier with the thought that it was after five, and that she could walk unashamedly into one of the cozy cocktail lounges a few blocks away. By the time she reached the first one, she didn't pause to question its vaguely seedy air, but slipped onto the nearest stool and arranged her furs about her shoulders. She ordered a whiskey sour, and tried not to finish it too quickly. Then she ordered another, and took it into a booth with her.

It was after her fourth drink that she became conscious of the attractive man who was watching her from the far end of the bar. She tried to smile, but the effect was that of a smirk. Nevertheless, he came towards her, and she stopped worrying about what she had seen in the mirror, and decided that she was still a handsome woman.

"May I sit down?" the man said. He was cute. He had a small white moustache and a distinguished jaw. He was just her type, Ellen thought girlishly.

"Please do," she said coyly. "I

wouldn't mind a little company. It's been a *tiring* day."

"May I introduce myself? My name is Pepys, Doctor Pepys. As a matter of fact, I believe we met once, several years ago. Aren't you Mrs. Ellen Angstrom?"

"Why, that's right." She studied his face, but her eyes weren't focusing correctly. "Of course, I remember you, Doctor. Didn't we meet at . . ." She trailed off vaguely.

"It was only a short acquaintance," the doctor said helpfully. "I was rather interested in your son, Jonathon, at the time. How is Jonathon, by the way?"

She froze. "You're not from that place, are you?"

"I beg your pardon?"

"That place Jonathon is at. You're not connected with them?"

"No, I'm in private practice. You mean Jonathon is—institutionalized at the moment?"

She shivered. "Don't say it like *that*. It's not that he's crazy or anything. There's *nobody* in my family that ever had *that* sort of thing wrong with them. It's a kind of veteran's hospital; the Army put him there. They said it was best."

"Wounded?"

She snorted. "He never left the east coast. Don't ask *me* why they sent him there. I had nothing to do with it."

The man reached into his pocket.

"Have you ever seen this before, Mrs. Angstrom?"



She took the round object from his hand.

"No. What's it for?"

"I didn't think I would have to use it this way, Mrs. Angstrom, but it may be best, to do so under the circumstances. Please keep looking at it. I wish you to remember when we first met, some twenty-four years ago. Then perhaps we can discuss Jonathon more intelligently."

She stared into the depths of the transparent globe, watching the moving lights.

"Mrs. Angstrom?" the doctor said.

She didn't answer.

"Would you please recall our first meeting now, Mrs. Angstrom? Will you please remember who I am, and where I came from, and what my purpose is?"

She looked up. "You again!" she said, and picked up her glass to down the remainder of her drink. Then she signalled the waiter for another. She seemed nervous and very much annoyed.

"I'm only trying to help," Pepys said quietly. "Your son is at a critical point right now, Mrs. Angstrom, and I need your help. Surely, you know why the Army has hospitalized your son. You know, but you won't admit it to anyone. He tried to slash his wrists, didn't he? Even to this day, at the age of thirty-six, I can see the scars on his flesh."

"I don't want to talk about it!" the woman moaned.

"But we must talk about it,

Mrs. Angstrom. You have a duty—"

"Stop bothering me! Stop torturing me!"

The drink arrived; she had no hesitation at finishing it, even before the waiter had moved away.

"Why can't you leave me alone?" Ellen said, a sob of self-pity in her voice. "Why do you have to blame me for everything that happened to Jonathon? Isn't he responsible for any of it? Must I always be the villain?"

"Villain's not the word, Mrs. Angstrom. But still—" He sighed. "There's no question that a great deal of your son's problem is traceable to you. To your lack of understanding, your lack of love, the way you transferred your hatred of your husband to him—"

"All right!" The tears were sliding down her powdered cheeks. "All right, so that's the way it was. But I couldn't help it, could I? I had a husband who didn't love me, a child who thought I was a criminal because I threw him out of my house! Can you blame me for that?"

"Are you sure your husband didn't love you, Mrs. Angstrom? Or was it because you were so reluctant to accept his love?"

"It wasn't any different than the way I was brought up." She was crying openly now, the tears lubricated by alcohol. "My mother was the same way. She had a bum for a husband, too. She had to throw him out, too—"

"I'm sure there are reasons

for your own difficulties, Mrs. Angstrom."

"Then why not blame *them*? My father and mother? Why pick on me? They were as much at fault as me, if you want to talk about fault. Why not blame them?"

For a moment, the analyst looked startled.

"Yes," he said musingly. "Yes, you have a point there, of course."

"I loved my father!" Ellen sobbed. "I really loved him. But he was so unfair to my mother. He *made* her throw him out, Doctor, she couldn't *do* anything else—"

"The chain of neurosis," Pepys whispered. "Where does it begin? Where does it end?" He was talking to himself.

"Why not get into the stupid machine of yours, and find out what made my mother so unhappy? Maybe you'll understand things a little better then." She put her head on the table. "You'll see," Ellen Angstrom said. "You'll see the way it was . . ."

"Yes," Pepys said, looking into space. "Another link in the chain. Perhaps that's the real place to begin. Or perhaps even further back, with the grandparents, or great grandparents, or even beyond . . ."

He looked at the woman, and for the first time, his eyes showed pity.

"Mrs. Angstrom. Would you do me one more favor?"

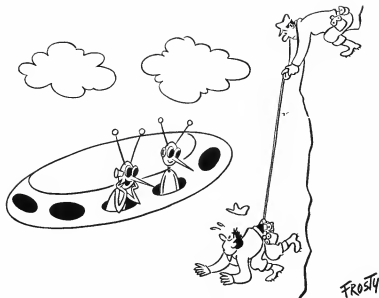
She looked up slowly, to see the tiny luminescent globe in his hand.

Agu came out of the dark stone mouth to see the yellow fire bright overhead. The air, still cold even beneath the yellow fire's burning rays, chilled her and made her wish for more skins to cover her body. But skins she would not have until her mate returned from the hunting, and the yellow fire had kindled and died many times already, without sign of him or the others. With a sigh, she went back to the dark stone mouth to see what must be done for the small man-thing her stomach had given forth.

She growled in her throat when she saw the stranger emerging from behind the great blue rocks that stood before the stone mouth. He wore strange skins, and he was tall and straight like the trees. He backed away when he saw her, and she knew her growls had frightened him. She bared her teeth, and retreated again, until he was out of sight. She would have investigated further, but the small man-thing in the cave was howling. She went inside, and found him naked and shivering on the damp floor, and his ceaseless cries brought such anger to her that she struck him with the back of her broad, hairy hand.

But the screams grew louder and the rage continued.

THE END



"He's the first one we've seen with a tail."



"Maybe it's hungry."

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